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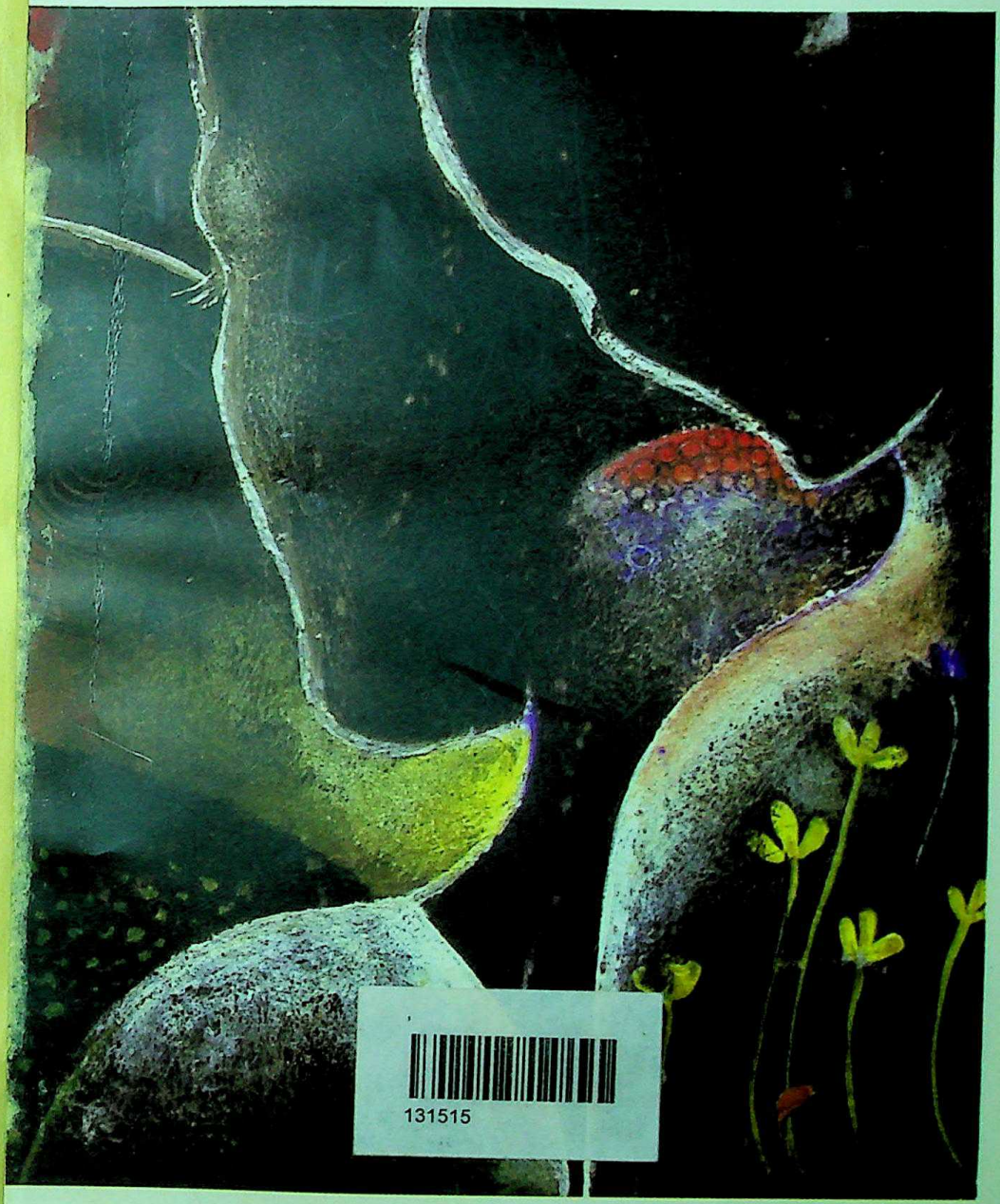

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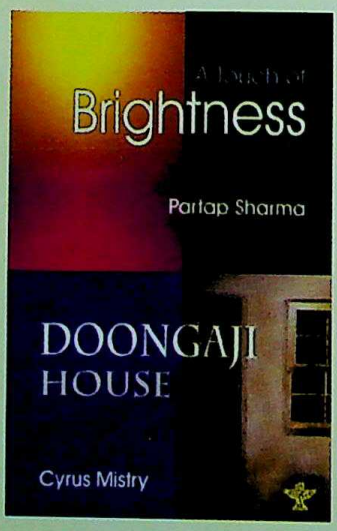

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The focus in this issue is on translation. We have three articles by Ramesh Chandra Shah ('Translation as Anasaktiyoga'), R. Parthasarathy ('Writing Between the Lines: The Politics and Poetics of Translation') and P.P.Ravindran ('Translation as Hoax: Art, Othering and Life Writing') – each arguing a unique point, thereby showing translation under a comprehensive light. According to Shah, translation is an absolutely necessary ingredient of "national author" as well as of what now threatens to become our destiny—that is, the so-called "planetary civilization." Regarding the exacting and rather hazardous nature of translation, he ventures to say, "You have to suspend your personality—your very own hard-earned predispositions and predilections; you have to acquire a sort of negative capability—get out of your own body and mind to inhabit someone else's body and mind—forget that you have a self with its own crying needs, its own emotional and intellectual axes to grind." For R. Parthasarathy, "to translate is to rewrite." He sharply brings into focus the fact that Indians are necessarily bilingual, and argues that in a multilingual society like ours translation from one language into another, historically from Sanskrit into the eloquent bhashas, is of vital importance in "keeping open the channels of communication, and preserving the cohesiveness and integrity of the nation." He then goes on to narrate in detail his own experience of translating from Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi and Urdu into English and concludes that translation helps "to build a bridge between cultures by promoting understanding and reducing mistrust, thus enabling us to regard the world as our neighbourhood."

P.P. Raveendran is more radical in his approach. For him, what is more important is "the relation of each text to what can loosely be called a pre-narrative location, its pre-history that covers an inter-textual mesh of myths, ideas, images, impressions and representations that ultimately get an identity and shape in the process of narrativization." He analyses his own experience of translating three texts from Malayalam into English and shows that different strategies of "othering" needs to be applied to different texts depending on the nature of the narrative and its relation to the pre-narrative location.

Penguin Books has recently brought out an interesting volume called *The Last Bungalow: Writings on Allahabad*, edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. One is amazed to see that right from Hsiuan Tsang to Mirza Ghalib to Rudyard Kipling to Mark Twain have written on this once fascinating city,

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what to speak of Jawaharlal Nehru, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala', Nayantara Sahgal or Ved Mehta—all of whom were residents of Allahabad in a native sense. As first-hand accounts of pre-colonial Allahabad are few and far between, this selection, of necessity therefore, is focussed mainly on the colonial city, from its rise, around 1800 to its catastrophic end two hundred years later.

Located at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati, Allahabad or 'Godville'—the 'babu' translation of the name that Mark Twain came across—has been frequented by pilgrims for two thousand years. However, it was only towards the latter half of the nineteenth century that Allahabad shed its identity as another dusty north Indian town and emerged as one of the premier cities of the Raj and the capital of the North-West Provinces. This metamorphosis, ironically, was brought about by colonial rule, whose beginnings Fanny Parkes has described at great length in her article. Allahabad was the home of the *Pioneer*, where Kipling was employed. Its university, one of the oldest in the country, attracted students from far and wide. Visited by the Buddhist scholar Hsiuan Tsang in the seventh century, the city is today visited by spiritual conmen and conwomen who come to attend the Magh and Kumbh Melas. As Kama Maclean's essay shows, far from being an ancient religious festival, the Kumbh Mela, which is held every twelve years, originated as recently as the 1860s.

In 1824, Bishop Heber wrote that Allahabad was a 'desolate and ruinous' place. Three years later, Ghalib compared it to hell, only hell was better. But for Nehru, Allahabad was where he was born and where he cut his political teeth; for Nayantara Sehgal, it was a model for civilized living; for Ved Mehta, it was, like other Indian cities, 'a jumble of British, Muslim and Hindu influences'; for veteran film personality Saeed Jaffrey, it was a place where a good time could be had, while one picked up a decent education; for poet Gyanranjan, it was a city one could fall in love with in one's youth; and for I. Allan Sealy, it was his parents' home town, a reservoir of family lore.

In an Introduction entitled 'Descendants', the editor deals elaborately with the settlers in Allahabad—Kashmiri Pundits, Parsis and, of course, the Bengalis. One of the earliest accounts of the Bengali presence in Allahabad was Bishop Heber's *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India* (1828). In it, Heber remarked that the Bengalees who had come and settled in these provinces when they were placed under British governors, were 'regarded by the Hindoostanees as no less foreigners than the English, and even more odious than Franks, from ancient prejudice, and from their national reputation of craft, covetousness and cowardice.' However,

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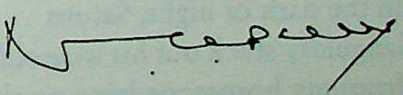
by the turn of the nineteenth century, the Allahabad Bengalis were sufficiently large in number, their errands were various—health, wealth and pilgrimage.

The Introduction highlights two major achievements of Allahabad so far as printing and publication are concerned. One was the founding of The Indian Press by Chintamoni Ghosh, who came from Bally in Howrah district in Bengal. The other was the launching of two magazines, *Prabasi* and *The Modern Reviews* by Ramananda Chatterjee who belonged to a poor Brahmin family from Bankura in Bengal, and was educated at Calcutta University. At a comparatively young age, he was appointed principal of Kayastha Pathshala in Allahabad, where he lived from 1895 to 1908. Perhaps the greatest magazine editor India has known, he started *Prabasi* (Expatriate) in 1901, and a second magazine, *The Modern Review* in 1907. The contributors to the inaugural issue of *The Modern Review* included Sister Nivedita ('The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality'), E.B. Havell ('The Indian Handloom Industry'), and Jadunath Sarkar ('Shivaji Letters'). It also carried reproductions of three Ravi Varma paintings, along with an editorial note on the artist, who had recently died. In 1908, Ramananda Chatterjee ran into trouble with the British over some of the views expressed in *The Modern Review*. Served with an order to close down the *Review* or leave Allahabad, he chose the latter option and returned to Calcutta, moving the editorial offices of the two magazines with him. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who joined the editorial staff there in 1928, wrote in glowing terms about the magazines in his autobiography *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*.

As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra insightfully points out, "In the last one hundred and fifty years, Allahabad has seen two migrations. The first began after the Mutiny of 1857 and ended a hundred years later, in the first decade after Independence. During it came the Ghoshs and Chatterjees, the Nehrus and Dhondys, and the Jhas and the Rudras. It made Allahabad what it was, and this anthology is a memorial to it. The second migration, which began in the 1980s, has largely been a local affair; from the Black Town to the White, from Chowk to Civil Lines, from Attarsuiya to Thornbill Road. It unmade the colonial city.... The same forces of history that transformed it from a nondescript provincial town into one of the premier cities of the Raj have turned it into a provincial town once again, ... Seen in this way, Allahabad's is a terribly human story."



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Archana Sahni

He Loved a Poet

He loved a poet.
He kept her first
and only book
not on the shelf
with the others
    but at his desk
    where he could
    see it. Sometimes
he carried it around
in his briefcase
and glanced at it
during interruptions
at official meetings.

If plants could rewrite history
and Meerabai turn into Krishna
during your Bru-coffee breaks,
then you could've been mine
in this lifetime.

    But that was
    not meant to be.

In the dark of night, Saturn
languidly stuck out his wise old head
from my horoscope lying on the bedside-table
and told me so: 'Some galaxies
are never meant to be discovered,

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only beguile children in fairytales;
some lovers are never meant
to be had, only loved.'

I continue to hold onto you
and you onto my book.

For you each poem
is just a poem. You don't see
I'm trying to show you
that Meerabai is me.
That Emily and Heathcliff
are me. That I am Durga
and her child. That I keep
turning into Christ.

Meditating over my words
you turn them into mantras.
You close your pores to them,
they cannot flow into you.
That day when I showed you a poem
instead of talking to you,
you didn't see the mourning
in the poem. Mourning
sprang out of the breaking
crucible of you and me.

No, I am not Christ
or plants rewriting history
or even Meerabai. I am only
Czeslaw Milosz who would
not have written a single line of poetry
if he could've had Freedom.

I would never have become a poet
if you could've been mine.
But in the occasional grip
of a clamouring Muse
and in the absence of a Mephistopheles,
I cannot help writing a poem.

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My vocation was given to me
by you.

He loved a poet.
That he could've also
loved the woman
who loved him enough to not
stop loving him and not
stop writing words even though
words to him remained
just words—this he did not know.

I will not write
a second book.

Make me bookless.
Return my first and only book
which you carry in your briefcase,
to the fire.

Return the book
to the fire
because the book
that you love so much
is in the way of the dreamer
who wrote the book.
Because the bark-turned-paper
you carry close
to your heart
is not my flesh,
throw the book
into the fire,
and set me free,
and let me see
in its light
extinguishing *paradisos*
vanishing
one by one
into the black hole
of hope.

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Lessons
for my father

Post-retirement,
a man's hands
move from paper
to things more palpable.

Shiny-red tomato skins
picked one by one under
a vendor's watchful eyes
have begun to blinker
the surfaces of cardboard files.
Our kitchen garden, Father,
is more than quenched
since you relinquished
pens for rubber hoses.

Under your tutelage,
the anarchist gardener has
finally been taught democracy.
The hibiscus is freed
of the gourd creeper's
suffocating embrace,
the banana plant no longer soars
unchecked, dwarfing others
under its shade.

* * *

When I stumble upon
black and white photos
that come loose from termite-eaten
family albums, I see that your
same hands cradled three bundles
of flesh, and brought home toys
purchased on official trips—
the wooden Bharatanatyam doll
that wouldn't stop shaking its head,
and the miniature tea-set in which
I served invisible tea. I recall

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the Indian Airlines toffees
presented on your outstretched palm.

Wood and ceramic and wrapper
you did touch with your hands.
So perhaps I am wrong to see
change, where there is none.
Perhaps this is a late realization in me
disguising itself as outward change
in you, a way of making reparation
for things gone unseen, when
the world was a fairytale
and parents, its ogres.

* * *

Standing at the edge
of the verandah's proscenium,
now all my adolescent sins
against you begin to surface
one by one,
as I recall the way that you
—unsung hero of a domestic drama,
standing in a patch of sunlight—
bent down to gently cup
with your hands the fluttering
broken-winged bulbul
brought in by a stormy night,
and a few days later
dug the earth to lay
a squirrel to rest
beneath the mango tree.

Only lessons not taught but learnt,
and learnt too late, can be put
into a poem like this
where even poetic justice
comes too late.

Every monsoon
when I watch you gently

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return to the garden
broken families of frogs
that stumble into our home,
I know then, that compassion
is not a fleeting welling-up
or the Dalai Lama's definition
of it consulted from time to time;
that it doesn't matter
what the hands touch,
it's the hands that matter.
It's the faster beating heart
behind the hands diving
to stall the calypso of an injured
bulbul or stray frog, that matters.
Your hands, Father.
My father's hands.

I Can Feel Saints Feeding from the Seed of Pain

Their faces bloom out
from the seed of pain
of which their body is the stalk
They go courting danger
Count their victories
by their defeats

The gentle war between spirit and flesh
is a shadow play they stage for the world
so they may lie undisturbed on cosmic waters
gurgling beneath their lids
Lepers' limbs and broken souls
come to life beneath their fingertips

I can feel saints feeding from the seed of pain

Look into the eyes of one
The exultation there is unmistakable
It is the pink joy of opening lotus buds
feeding from the seed of pain
drunk on the madness of the world

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Rakhi Redefined

It's time to give up
the pose of a protector.

In the past, fathers and brothers
with *tilak* on forehead,
sword in hand astride a horse,
might've fought unto death.
Not wives and sisters,
perhaps a nagging thirst for fame
pressing deeper than fear
of the enemy sword,
sent them on the kill.

I met a woman from the land of
the seven sisters, who told me of a festival
in which brothers lovingly cook
for their sisters. 'You don't have
a festival for sisters?' she asked incredulously.
She made me want to redefine
rakhi as a friendship thing,
and the *rakhi* as a friendship string.
Sisters too need pampering.

So, this *raksha bandhan*,
before stretching out your arm
for yet another gaudy thread,
don't forget to tie
onto your sisters' wrist
all the *rakhis* that you missed.

Dream Quest

A woman standing on top of a hill
forgetting she has no voice
opens her mouth to howl like the wind the wolf
coming to her rescue
screeching mournful peacocks fill
her mouth's cave

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Walking down a hill
she carries soiled clothing to a stream
With the rhythm of her washing
civilizations begin to rise and fall
The frothing dirt of collars and feet flows
down to sea
Hatching tadpoles and fish
taste the soap
and know it is home

In her rushing between a walk and sprint
to her cottage, is the sound of marching,
drums, and the tremulous pause
when a pair of eyes advances or retreats another's horde –
She steps into her home:
she's in the bull's territory –
opening jars, cupboards, jerkily
till coloured powders fill her kitchen's air
and the sneezing Furies, Modesty, Patience
and Household Ease, holiday

She's rushing out again –
In her quickening pace is the thump catch rip
of the fawn's bending neck
held in the panther's apathetic gaze
Falling clothing are trampled by her feet
Her body will be
the thorn bending
to drink from that clear blue forest's pool
which will break
for her moment's feigned drowning
when she will kill
and be killed

See
how she walks towards it
naked but religiously

See her rising like the dawn
from her dream's foliage

❑

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K.K. Srivastav

Vexations

Depths don't tease me now,
I have overcome my inertia.
That enigmatic object fascinates
me no longer,
I have avenged my amnesia.
That enkindling entity sates me
perfectly,
for, that entity never
overpowers me.
Misconceptions hunt me no longer,
for, incessant clash inspires me.
The glimmer of the moment faints,
what fades away stays no more with me.
The hours have become empty,
I don't ask them to fall in line.
Now, days aren't langurous any longer,
I seek dissolution in the stymieing depths.

Serious Poetry and Sons of Phoebus

My dear friends,
sons of Phoebus.
Ponder over what ensue.

Serious poetry is not a hollow myth,
it descends like purring sensations,
elliptically tiptoeing the unknowable
paths to unconquered vagaries of mind.

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And thus
serious poetic impulses soberly invade
the poets from nowhere,
engaging them with incisive convolutions
fixed in a timeless form.

For example, a serious poet would, at times,
go nostalgic, at his own cost and
wade through, in vain, sometimes lighter
and sometimes sober.

Obscure ideas, unevenly placed,
on a rampage, marauding aimlessly,
in the realm of lingering intuitions.

Obstructed upheavals, ideals,
well-aroused, tormenting and extinguishing,
going astray in the realm of shoreless
enquiries.

Obtruded wanderings around the slackening
abysses,
pulsating dreams disconcerting the bliss,
outlines legion,
all sprawling together.

Oppressed enchantments, senseless and
azure,
innocent darkness relinquishing it's kindness,
fruitless desires pepping up the unstirred mind,
suddenly growing pale with fear.
Obsessed infatuation with objects,
terrestrials and extra-terrestrials,
heaving dispassionately through
the layers of unidentified corners of
the brain.

Links between visible and invisible,
between temporal and ephemeral,
between escapable and inescapable,

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between explicable and inexplicable
convulsing, floating and immersing.

Serious poetry,
a continuum
of resonance
of muse, broken,
hazy and moiling
endeavouring
inanely to be
one with it's own
reminiscences.

Serious poetry
begins where
recesses of conscious
and unconscious mind
start melting and discovering
each other,
together.

Deep within my being
a few volcanoes make a mish-mash of everything
sane and insane,
and make me a human being

Grotesque Masks

(A poem inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*)

We crawl slowly into the wilderness of
their incomplete perfections,
earnestly hoping to confront them with
their irreversibility.
Figure submerging in background.

Immensely pleased, they strut to and fro
in an aquarium, tiny, talking and laughing,
drinking and eating, insensibly joyous,
forgetting their cheery faces carry the load of

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their sunken imperfections.
Background overshadowing figures.

Their paleness, writ large on every wall,
carries the wondrous rigidities of their
intellectual apogee, in deeds and in
misdeeds too.
Figures lulling background into stupor.

The masks, wriggling, crowded and incoherent,
curse the blaze and glitter of the stars,
the stars blessing us on our birth, for
now how impossible it is,
our stars must know,
to differentiate between genuine faces
and grotesque masks.

Dilemma of A Psychotic

Multitudinous layers of thoughts,
menacingly marched valiantly within his
half-hid, half-buried world of self-denial
where he fought involuntarily his own
originalities, unsuccessfully.
Multiplicities of actions and reactions, intense
and displaced, tormented him intermittently
in his own world of self-devaluation where he
stayed put, enjoying self-fulfillment, imaginary
and isolating.
Symbolically undoing the distorted emotional
base, he feigned a triumph over anomalous
behaviour inwardly oriented towards excessive
association of withdrawn self, precipitating
his lonewolfishness.

"Damn, damn, those voices, threatening and
howling, those sights, thundering and crawling,
those odours, miasmatic and suffocating," cried
he, in delirium, but in vain.
Who was that who tiptoed him all through?

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Who was that who ate him away?
Who was that who puzzled him all through?
Who was that who blunted his feelings?
Answers so vivid but unperceivable.
Where did he inherit the sperms of sinfulness from?
Where did he learn the differences between the wild extremes from?
Where did he unlearn the differences between the mellowed extremes from?
Where did his realities stand and when did he retreat from these?
When did ruminations come to him and how?
When did fragmentation consolidate him and how?
When did he find himself in conflicting assurances?
When did his inhibitions demonstrate themselves?
When did his lose inner controls start mimicking his outer controls?

The psychotic, cozying in his withdrawn world,
asked his doctor.
"But did I ever exhibit a veneer and a facade of inevitabilities of profound goodness and equally profound politeness?"

And the doctor, giving him a wry look
bypassed the question as yet another symptom
of insanity.

❑

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K. Satchidanandan

The Last Goal

I, Zinedine Zidane,
the stranger you feel like stabbing
as the French sun dazzles you[1],
one with a different face and a different build
still hoping in vain to be
one among you,
one who drank molten steel to
cultivate his muscles so that
you might love him
one who ran along sharp-pointed nails
to grow nimble of foot,
sharpened his Algerian gaze
looking for stars yet to rise[2]
and his brain by grinding it
on French's whet-stone and
rasping it with Arabic's file.

I was shown the red card long ago:
during my disgraceful childhood in that
squalid suburb of Marseilles[3]
and my rebellious adolescence.

Pardon me if for eight seconds
the raging blood of my wounded race
hunted down from New York to Gujarat

---

1. Remember Albert Camus's *The Outsider*.
2. Zidane was born to Algerian immigrants.
3. He grew up in La Castellane, a suburb of Marseilles in Southern France.

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rushed into my head I bow only for *namaz*
Pardon me if the tears of my
acid-soaked motherland rose like a
tidal wave to engulf the venomous
heart of my public abuser
Pardon, for having infused for eight seconds
the illusion of the playground with
the bitterness of reality,
for having subverted the soft rule of
the game with the harsh rule of life.

There were no spectators before me,
no cameras: only the wrinkled face
of my mother, all mothers, in exile;
only the last chance history gave me
to avenge every disgraced being on earth
by a single bloodless gesture.

That, pardon me children,
Was Zinedine Zidane's final header,
his last goal.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Yayati

Sixty is the speeding
of death's meteor along
the nightsky of life:
for a moment it bathes
everything in the light of heaven:
the wild swing on the tamarind tree
the whispers of the dead on the banyan leaves
the nineteen brown horses in the dream
some desolate spaces, some forgotten wounds,
some rains, some lips.

Childhood is a life in itself,
another vision of earth, says

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the peacock feather inside the book.
It is not only the past its dance illumines:
every grain of the present carries its blue touch.

This flash blinds me
I burn, gold.
Tell me angel, is this
a Blade of Grass or Urvashi?
Is this Word, or Mars?
Is this Birth, or?

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Mislaid Objects

In a flash I recall
all the mislaid objects of my life:
the ten little sandheaps made in play
forgotten under the dry leaves in the
shade of the mango tree,
the umbrella left in Apu's saloon
on a day the awaited rain failed to turn up,
the pen dropped from the trouser-pocket
while climbing the cashewnut tree
on the way back from school,
the skyblue shirt lost in the
hotel wardrobe in Riga,
the long list of books lent never returned,
some unpaid debts, some unreturned loves.

Forgetfulness alone never forgot me.
Began misplacing my heart
as I fell in love,
misplacing similes and metaphors
as I began to write.
Later, looking at the hills I felt
the sky had mislaid them
and the clouds had misplaced the rainbow.

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I have begun to feel now
this very earth has been misplaced by God;
us too on it.
In the order he recalls
he takes back :
rivers,
forests,
us.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Daughter

I see my thirty-year old daughter once again
This time as a six-month old.
I bathe her, wash away all
the dust and muck of thirty years.
Now she glistens in liquid radiance
like a short Amichai poem.
The little towel gets drenched in Time.
Beethoven stands raising his
more than human hands
as the window panes turn into
the keys of a piano
My daughter emerging from a symphony
offers me a hug

Outside, rain's *bihag*:
Kishori Amonkar.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Hand

You place your hand upon mine,
like the horizon touching the Earth.
Children shout,
the curry-leaf tree has blossomed.

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Four storks rise
from the bamboo bush
and dart across the clouds.
A rainbow shines
above the hedge.
A river curls up under the table,
licking our feet.
We reach Mount Kailas
holding onto a sentence
descended from above.

Your body is all wet,
my wings are red.
The words of that sentence
now turn into trees
and hide us from God's gaze.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

A Man With A Door

A man walks with a door
along the city street;
he looks for its house.

He had once dreamt
of his woman, children and friends
coming in through that door.
Now he sees the whole world
pass through this door
of his never-built house:
men, vehicles, trees,
beasts, birds, everything.

And the door, its dream
rising above the Earth,
longs to be the door of Heaven;
imagines clouds, rainbows,
demons, fairies and saints pass through it;
and shines like gold.

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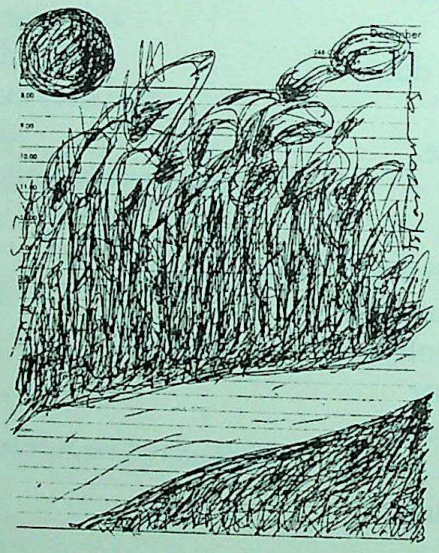
But it is the owner of Hell
who awaits the door.
Now it just yearns
to be its tree, full of foliage
swaying in the breeze;
just to provide some shade
to its homeless haulier.

A man walks with a door
along the city street;
a star walks with him.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

❑



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N.G. Unnikrishnan

Children's Park on 30th July

Two themes
single pulse

Children's park
suicide

Giraffe-like trees
breezy shades
seesaws, swings
parents, children
frolic

Pesticide
or hanging
suicide
easier
for
crops-failed
loan-defaulters

A crying child
slithers down
the tongue
of a cement tiger

Mother claps
father claps
fear now turns into
laughter

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In sad kerosene light
a morsel,
down
the throat of
a child

Mother takes one
herself
Father hanged
a week ago

Suicide or park
about what shall I write?

First suicide
then park

Let
children
of the ones who committed suicide
also
come

and play
in my park.

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Mother-walk

Lighting
"Nilavilakku"[1]
the same keertana[2] everyday:

---

1. a lamp lit at pooja time, dusk time morning time
2. a musical composition praising any God. Here Lord Siva of Tiruvaikkom temple

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"O Lord Siva of Tiruvaikom
take me out of this hell"

Mother, eighty-six,
a dusk-time
chirping bird

(Such rites
resolve anyone
may be
like
daily morning shaves
Pundit Nehru had
in prison)

Standing behind
I let a hundred-rupee note
drop

Scintillating dance
fresh currency whisperings

A lightning tiger-leap
or a legendary goal-keeper
saving a penalty bullet shot

She held it tight
to her once papaya-sized breasts
I milked for six years,
one now cut, the other sagged.
She closed her eyes half,
resumed

"O Lord Siva....."

Thank God
her arteries, veins
like the National Highway
at cool wee hours
clear

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kidneys, intestines, excretions
clockwork

Quarrelsome she is,
her "Navarasas"[3] suggest
withdrawal
from anything worldly

Her monkey shines
makes one
laugh and cry
like Chaplin's acts

Small things

Her wickers
and oil
lighting up
your face
daily

O Lord Siva
while putting it out
please do it
painlessly,
like a cardiac arrest or something
during sleep

O Lord
you who swallowed
poison
to save
the moveable
and the immovable

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

---

3. Nine dominant expressions like Sringara, Karuna etc. of Abhinaya, laid down by Sage Bharata

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Infinity

Sunbirds
On chrysanthemum,
babblers around

A yellow butterfly's
soundless helicopter
hovers on ears of grass

Young coconut palm leaves
quivered
Sun-gold on leaves

From the ground next
boys appealed
boundary or catch

Living in
reflections
in your clear lakes of eyes
pained you are no more
is someone named
God

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

Paru

Prostitute
always
a good omen

Caustic
Love-me eyes
strike

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That
collected idly-chutney
bungalow image of yours
scootering, husbanding, sari-clad sterility
Up and down
cinema halls, supermarkets, temples
wriggles to splinters

Breasts
flaring up
breathes life into
Goddess Parvathi
buried in
home-made
frigid
dumb-deaf
dance

Here
she is
in your gold rimmed glasses
the great artist of "Kama kala"
coupling as monkey, elephant,
creatures variegated,
the Cosmic Yoni

Spitting betel leaf juice
twitching her red Durga lips
exploding your arse
"Look straight Nair"[4]

Translated from Malayalam by the Poet

---

4. 'Nair' here means 'husband' in contextual, colloquial use, in Malayalam. Generally, it loosely denotes a forward caste in Kerala, under which there are numerous sub-divisions.

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Outdatedness

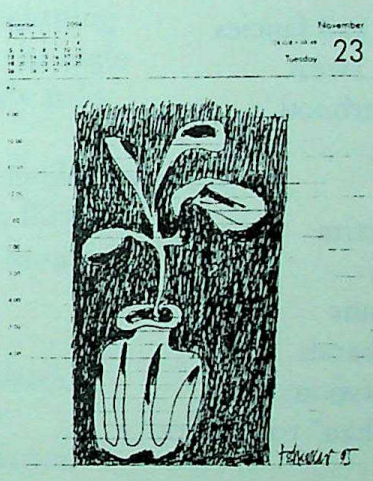
Caught
in the crosswires
of assassin outdatedness

A page set,
letters written

like stars
in the eyes
of a young one
minutes
before riot

(This poem is written in English)

❑



N.G. Unnikrishnan / 33

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Prativa Satpathy

It is not Disrobing

The saree is the theme
of myriad legends, lyrics
and tales
but the saree is only a symbol
Otherwise why so much hurt
and so much humiliation is caused
by pulling off the saree?
Womanhood is an honour
and a hidden vitality
which belong not merely
to a woman's body
but also to her dreams and fancies
to her blood, flesh and sweat
and surely to her motherhood
And to her divinity.

Today woman is the victim
of violation everywhere
by hundreds of Dussasans
false lovers, foolish husbands
and of many wicked passions
but there is no "Sudarshan" to protect
and no Bhimsen
To avenge the wrong.

The stream of blood
shed by dishonoured woman today
is not menstrual blood
but blood from the heart

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pierced by arrows
In vain was all my fortitude
over twenty-five years
so was my audacity to survive
till a beautiful sunset
Like the fish struggling to breathe in air
writhing on the sands of the river bank.

Between the cunning of upstarts
and the mocking laughter of on-lookers
my azure blue saree of honour
enveloping the earth, heaven and the nether-world
and stretching over past, present and future
is being torn to pieces.

Translated from Oriya by Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

Fire and Fuel

If You are the torrential rain
I am the line of naked lightning
You are the sky grey as the eagle
and I the flowering paddy field.

If You are the autumn enveloping the forest
I am the teak laden with flowers
You are the core of the mountain
I, the bursting cascade.

You are the deepest meditation
I the nun immersed in it.
I am the passionate intonation
and You the resonant Omkar.

Whether lightning
or a cascade
or a field pregnant with life
In Your presence
I am only the sacred scented fuel

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which You are eager to engulf
in Your fiery embrace.

Translated from Oriya by Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

If Left Unsaid

That which on the impulse
was about to be said
and yet remained unsaid
without being clothed in words
is unique; distinct
in millions of spoken words.

It is stuck in the deep throat,
remains there embedded like a stone
heedless of it, the sun's chariot
dashes across the sky
and the west turns crimson
like the ears of a deer
and the soles of God's feet.

I have forgotten and lost track
of what I said about what
and to whom.
In the midst of such commotion
the word which remained unsaid
stays entrenched
like an immobile stone
sometimes in the deep throat;
sometimes close to the pounding heart;
sometimes it swims in the blood-stream
Perhaps that which is left unsaid
becomes immortal.

Translated from Oriya by Chandramoni Narayanaswamy

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Rabindra K. Swain

Cemetery, the Temptress

Mother, mother,
on whatever branch
I throw the weight of my breath
at breaks,
breaks a silently sitting bird's neck

The earth is drunken
sipping the spilled blood.
The hairs of my breath
stands up, quivering
with its ancient hunger.

Sometimes my breath bows
the branches down
to touch the ground
and smell the pungency of pyre
that mocks the rain and burns.

Mother, I am afraid,
one day my breath will peel
the tree of its greenery of will
but nonetheless it will cling
to its late loghood as would

An angel. But so long as I
am amidst the half-burnt logs
so as not to let them be devoured
by the termite or licked
by the pyre's tongue

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I will not let a twig of my breath
be fed upon its consumptive wrath
to finish all that comes before
its sight, this cemetery hanging
from the spectre of my insomniac eyes.

Moths

"On Monday noon, 11 tribals were killed after police opened fire at a mob of oustees protesting the rehabilitation package handed to them."
The New Indian Express, January 3, Bhubaneswar

Let me play a little innocuous game
keeping my children and wife away—
a game of fire.

A fire big enough
to consume moths.

Nobody else will be hurt;
only the moths.

I am said
to be stoking fire

but who else
is more adept

at self-immolation
than moths?

What is rumour,
once moths, dismembered,

are cremated? What
trace in ash?

The fire I trust
with my fingers burnt.

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What's Wrong With This Thing of Mine?

I feel terribly uncomfortable.
I have been woken up
by the breathless blowing of conchs.
(When did I see the sunrise last?)
I would have admired it otherwise,
some other time.

The joggers returning
cover half of the road
and birds are up in sight,
though not chirping.

The lips' first touch of the day
with the cup of tea
was intervened by the blaring
over microphone the election manifesto:
"Employment to the youth,
Empowerment to women..."
followed by the mile-long sloganeers.

I put down the cup and gulp
the half-empty glass of water.
I get up from the balcony
and enter the study to resume a Murakami
from where I had left, late last night
only to bump into my wife
approaching me with a smile
That said *who's going*
To sleep with whom this time?

That was enough to flare me
For last night she had turned her back to me,
Saying it's no time.

I swallowed the spit
as I could not have told her that or this
feeling of mine: What's wrong
with this thing of mine

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for fear her smile will
suddenly lose its colour.

That apart, there are still two more days to go
for the fourteenth General Election to be over.

Mirror Too Close to the Face

You do to me
what my father didn't:
twist my bones
to suit your need.

My father didn't
even box my ear
and you my daughter
make me spin on toes!

When will you grow up,
be a girl among girls
reserve love for me
when I am old?

A ramshackle effigy
is all that you've made
of your father that hides
fire; imminent, lustrous.

How long would I keep counting
my steps, absentmindedly kick
chips to my heart's contentment,
sweep leaves to clear the path?

Do you taunt these sticks
of my bones from above, Father?
Ask me, "is this how I
brought you up, my son?"

Father, it is two years
you are gone and my nights
are still lit up by your glowing face.
I haven't asked myself

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If it is the firefly of my guilt
or the lighthouse of your love.
My daughter knows you well
but cannot recollect your face.

Her confusion is not certainly mine
but her question "What did you
learn from him," is a mirror
so close to my face I can't see a thing.

Children's Secrets

The Rainbows are prayers
of children
when their parents are rain
and sunshine.

Not yet partisans,
the only side the children are with
is that of the gods
for the gods are forever minors.

Only you and I
scramble on each other's back
to scale their height,
a lovable arrogance
like that of Whitman's
"I contain multitude."

No less admirable are
our efforts at compromise
Only that we don't show it.

But it shows itself
despite ourselves
in our mutterings in sleep,
which our children memorize
and prize as their secrets.

❑

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Radha R.

Mother-1

Once upon a time there was a little seed who often liked to think of all kinds of things.

Once she thought, looking at the clouds floating by in the sky and the yellowing leaves in the river's currents beneath– "How nice is must be to move....!"
Suddenly there was a gust of wind. And unknown to the seed, she was really ready for moving.

"Help!" she cried as she suddenly dropped off her Mother Plant's body.
"Mother!" she called out in her soft little seed's voice by way of farewell.
But Mother Plant was sleeping, her old head with its canopy of yellowing leaves gently nodding in the wind...

So the little seed floated away on the back of the north-bound currents.
Far, far away, in fact to a completely new and different land enriched by alien salts and unfamiliar waters.

Yet being a very brave and calm little seed she did very well for herself indeed in her new neighbourhood. Right from the moment she set down a tiny hair-like root into the new soil.... And to the sky a tentative tender question mark-shaped shoot....

Soon it was time for the warm winds that brought her to her new home to return.
She was just sending out her first buds.
"Please wait, winds!" she smiled to them.

Then upon those familiar south-bound currents, encrypted in fragrance, she sent her first message of well-being to her mother....

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The Mother Plant received her message. She felt strange, for no longer was she a mother.
Or a sister.
Or a comrade.
Or even simply a friend to that which she faced now....New...
That was no longer a little seed with its shiny, earnest, spirited face encased by a pair of tiny gossamer wings...
Suddenly she too was something more yet something less than her sense of mother-plantness to her little seed with which she had always identified.
That one sprightly seed she realized had changed her forever....

...A flower bloomed upon the Mother Plant's bough.
Of such hue, such compelling perfume; such dazzling charm of countenance as had never bloomed from her soul before...

In its opening the dry spear-grass upon the rocks,
the prickly shrubs with their angry thorns,
the drooping creepers with their weepy leaves,
the towering trees with innumerable ferns and climbers hanging from their gigantic armpits,
the moist little clumps of tender grass clinging to the mossy pebbles drenched in dew and shining with tiny violet star-flowers
....nay, even the rocky crag itself upon which they all grew....
The river that roared below and the sky that sang above
carrying each, hidden lives in their pulsing hearts....all melded into her.....
Her!
The Mother of All things;
The Ground from whence all Being springs...

Tiger

And in She rides
starry-eyed
astride Her mighty Tiger
He ripples his stripes
against the silk of Her thighs
and the lightning strikes
inside Her

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Into the silent wild
legs strapped to his sides
She flies with the leaping Tiger

Love shackled inside
his guarded eyes
His blood
a moonlit river

With feral sighs
he slides inside
.....
And She is locked
in his stripes
forever.

Writing

Poems are
long, thin lines
with anchors at the end of them
connecting me as I float by
to the fact of my existence.
All alone in travel
through strange terrains
in the anonymous beds
of hotel rooms,
in the shattered glass
of living life
I see myself
gather shards
and sit by night, words in hand
sewing together
the wholes.

Fish

The sand-grains scorch
So many shocks
slammed on the searing shore

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A blinding mosaic
in the bulging eye
The sky explodes
into a million suns...
A bubble wells
Mucousy-Red
to the torn mouth from the convulsed throat
It swells
rests there
till the electric tremors end
like a blurb
without the words...

Still dimly alive while being sliced
with the scales stripped off the skin
...Then it ends
as through a rent in the net of the sky
she escapes
like lightning...

Room

9.30 pm.
Time to shut shop
draw the shutters on
the daily grind
...The system hums to life
singing its patented signature tune
that says 'Welcome
to your second Life...'
I go there
without milk or fruits*
A trembling two seconds behind
my virtual bridegroom...
Carefully
we leave behind our bodies

---

* In Kerala, by custom, the bride enters the bridal chamber carrying a tray of milk and fruits which she offers to the groom. According to tradition, the groom accepts, has his share first and offers her the rest.

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outside our wall-less room
upon the threshold rack
like a pair of courteous shoes.
Like whales
stranded upon the beach
with the dimming sea in their eyes
just out of reach of the incoming tide
the Blue light of the screen
dryly rains upon our cheeks
...Needles on the skin.

Moon and the Sea

She's just hiding out of his sight
cupping her hurt and luminous face
in the dark and tender palms of the Night.
A moonless night
is not a night without the moon...

Restless
he sharply draws in his breath.
The receding tides
the darkening currents
the sullen heart heaves
silent
turbulent

...Still
he cannot bring himself to confide
how much
he wants her.

❑

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Swarnali Biswas Bhattacharjee

The Question

How much pleasure
How much pain and love!
What burden of hidden sins
What breach of promise
and the failure of how many kisses?

Oh God, how much pain
do you endure
to become a human?

Translated from Bengali by Subhrajyoti Bhattacharya

Waiting

The wind carries
the smell of your cologne
You have come to the city
The sky has worn blue
exactly the colour of your shirt.
The Umiam lake is in spate,
If none tells,
I still can feel
you have come.

The winding hilly road
little blue flowers
the green pine leaves
Did they sense your arrival?

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And I wrapped myself in green
waiting in this infinite afternoon
for you
barren alone, like a stone.

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

Dawn

Night, like a shameless whore
disrobes herself
of the starry gown
taking a bath
in the fountain of light
in this dawn.
in the ridges of her sculpted body
lies alive desire and deceit,
the first steps of civilisation,
which means
in darkness does take birth
the creation!

You, like this night too
spread yourself in eternity—
I promise
I will wash away your gloom
In this lovely dawn.

Translated from Bengali by Subhrajyoti Bhattacharya

The First Cloud

To the clouds I'll give my address,
I'll give my nondescript biodata to the sky.
In the torrent of monsoon
I'll throw the torn pages of my diary
to be washed away,
so that these blue words

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can reach him,
who's away, far away...
in some unknown city
in the country of Mohenjodaro.
He's perhaps too busy
vending the fairy tales
throughout the mystical evenings.
Perhaps, he is tired too...
Oh cloud,
if you can
caress him, love him,
touch his tired chin,
send his tears to me,
I am thirsty for the first drop of rain.

Translated from Bengali by Subhrajyoti Bhattacharya

To You Beauty

Beauty, do not let him go
he has come to you.

See, the orbit of time has clung to his wrist.
A fabulous swimmer he also is...

After going through the miasma of distress,
today his heart is girdled by green moss.
His palm bears signs of a raging storm,
the exploits of a sea monster,
the spiralling yells.

After swimming through those nightmarish sea waves,
he is very tired.

If you can,
please bring some semblance of order in his wet hair,
and moisten his parched lips with a sweet kiss.

Translated from Bengali by Subhrajyoti Bhattacharya

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Tenzin Tsundue

When it Rains in Dharamsala

When it rains in Dharamsala
raindrops wear boxing gloves,
thousands of them
come crashing down
and beat my room.
Under its tin roof
my room cries from inside
and wets my bed, my papers.

Sometimes the clever rain comes
from behind my room,
the treacherous walls lift
their heels and allow
a small flood into my room.

I sit on my island-nation bed
and watch my country in flood,
notes on freedom,
memoirs of my prison days,
letters from college friends,
crumbs of bread
and Maggi noodles
rise sprightly to the surface
like a sudden recovery
of a forgotten memory.

Three months of torture,
monsoon in the needle-leafed pines
Himalaya rinsed clean

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glistens in the evening sun.
Until the rain calms down
and stops beating my room
I need to console my tin roof
who has been on duty
from the British Raj.
This room has sheltered
many homeless people.

Now captured by mongooses
and mice, lizards and spiders,
and partly rented by me.
A rented room for home
is a humbling existence.

My Kashmiri landlady
at eighty cannot return home.
We often compete for beauty
Kashmir or Tibet.

Every evening,
I return to my rented room;
but I am not going to die this way.
There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry like my room
I have cried enough
in prisons and
in small moments of despair.

There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry,
my room is wet enough.

❑

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Yuyutsu

Sagarmatha

The turquoise lake
that longs to belong to the ocean
trapped to see
the dazzling face of the Everest.

The climbers from the world over
come to see their haggard faces
in the clear light of her crystal eyes
before facing the forehead of the Sky.

First Mountains, Mother Mountains

Stench of burning hair
in the stretch of boundless snow.

Whose blood-drops
amble through Yeti's trail?

The forehead of the sky besmeared
with the massacre of a million dreams

Who are these who dance a frenzied swirl
around the shaman's drum on the glacier?

The squeaking chicken
in the baskets of the porters

final fear of death
in the cage of the rattling bones.

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On the top of the world
I stand facing the gorgeous glacier

with my late
mother's smiling face.

Wind and Mist

Wind would never win.
It's the mist that rules here

In the domain of the Lord of the nether world
it seeps into the corners,

cracks and crevasses, into my shoes,
in the pores of my skin. Mist, the mild spirit

like Namche Bazaar's little girl who
won me over with her cool stare

as I went down the slope,
defeated at Silence's sprawling edge.

Summit

'Truth left behind,
in the fragrant villages and the world'
I said to myself
after I climbed
the summit, weary and breathless,
the wind whipping my eyes,
the head giddy
from the inconceivable heights.
I bowed in awe
and positioned a primrose
on my Maya's
snowy chest. She smiled
at the folly of it all—
empty looks, childish arrogance

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the blank stretch of
endless snow spaces,
and nothing beyond.
'Truth left behind, on the trail
in the fragrant villages and the world.'
She smiled and sent
me scuttling down
her mountains
dashing through the alpine deserts
past green glades and
fermented canyons'
black undergrowth
where real life's eternal springs flow.

The Buddhist Flag Flutters

The Buddhist flag flutters
to the call of the barking deer

to the flight of the golden eagle
circling above Tyangboche, in the galaxies

of untouched unborn avatars.
The saffron flag quivers

to the hum of Dolma's
broom sweeping stone-steps strewn

with palm leaves
and *Lays* plastic packs.

The rainbow flag waves in the winds
of Bigu, weight of the wasted centuries on its spine,

the shaman's hollowed skull full of travellers' blood,
the magical Yak's history of flying skins.

The flag furls on the way to Namche,
amused to see the growing greed

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of Yeti, the fresh global food
it feeds on every morning of the new millennium—

STD, Internet, Cafes, Cakes, camera
and digital colour's click, click...

On the trail to Everest
where Dharma bums walked past eternal springs
with their wayward dog-souls

the flag thrums its blade to see
porters left out freezing out in the cold,
fees charged in Euros for entry of moving cameras
in Nirvana's historic courtyards.

It laughs to see the Lama
forget the mantras he parroted all his life
and watch Baywatch and Bond in One
sipping Amstel beer instead of *chhyang*
from his favourite Yak's back

while outside all night long dismal snow falls
obstinately melting centuries of salt load
placed on the exhausted zopkioks' bleeding backs.

Range

(For the porters of the Everest region)

The burden
of nightshift's filth

never-ending treks
in vortex of weight whorls

endless agony
of roving in the kingdom of snow

the bare bargain
of blue dawns and emerald ranges

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for bleeding eyes
of dark tunnels

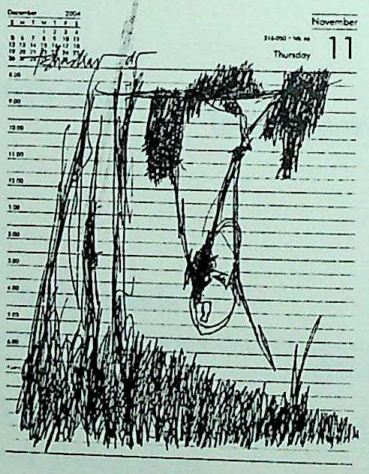
of spinach piles, pots
of curd, jerkins of fresh milk

for beds
of liquor-vomits

and a lifetime
sickness in a village

on a hilltop
drooling in a drowse

that's death.



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Object

Ashok

"How's your headache, now? Should I massage?"

"Oh, I'll really consider myself lucky the day you massage my head! Lord Dinkar would really become my saviour that day."

"Lord Dinkar is your saviour today. Here, let me massage your head! Remove this pillow."

"Leave it. You'll massage for a day and complain for ten days. Tell your friends that you are my servant."

"That I am. Is it a lie?"

"What else is it if not a lie? When do you nurse me? I must have nursed you umpteen times. And I'm always busy taking care of you and your children only. But who cares for me?" Rupa began sobbing and sniffing. Tears welled up in her eyes. Satish always wants to avoid this situation. He feels like pulling his hair in frustration. Nothing, no dialogue, no activity remains in order. Everything confused, full of swollen thorns, like cactus...oh...thorns of cactus....

"Mornings are not pleasant these days. Hands and feet ache, wild ideas come to mind. One doesn't feel like getting up. One doesn't even feel like changing sides. It's aching even in changing sides. Waves of pain keep recurring in the body. I wish someone could run magical cool hands over my body, to suck all my aches and pains, and recharge my body and soul."

'What an idiot this M.D. is! This bastard tells me to come at nine in the morning. He doesn't have anything to do at home. He has to just get up and come to the office, straight. He has nothing to do with his family. I doubt whether they even sleep together at night...'

"Now what a weeping you have started early in the morning. If you have a headache take some tea and give me some too. You prepare such excellent morning tea." Satish tried to cajole Rupa. But Rupa remained unaffected. She kept lying just like that. She pulled the pillow from the side

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to cover her head with it. Satish is unable to think what to do. Sometimes he felt like preparing tea by himself and offering Rupa too. But he can't make himself get up. He has almost forgotten how to prepare tea. Now he cannot do any household chores, cannot even do personal work. Even his undergarments are washed by Rupa. He has become totally dependent on her. The thought that he should help his wife in household chores has often come to his mind. Wife and husband are the two wheels of the conjugal cart. The family runs with the full co-operation of the two. Man should be sensitive towards his wife. It is not the duty of the wife only to look after home. The husband should help his wife cooking, shopping, child-care and knitting etc. There is no separation between household and outside work. Wife and husband are not siblings. These principles keep peeping only in his mind. But he is unable to act on it. How he wishes that office should not accompany him home! But it has just not been possible. Office always manages to enter his home.

'He makes me do all the work but backs out when it comes to providing facilities. When I asked for the vehicle on the occasion of my brother-in-law's daughter's marriage, he refused. There is no harm if his family members keep on fooling around in the vehicle. But if I ask for it he quotes rules, starts lecturing on thriftiness. Lecture your wife! Everyday she goes to Hathwa Market in office vehicle. He may not have the guts to utter a word there. He keeps scolding us only. As if we are his slaves. Get up...sit down...'

"Will you keep lying like that? It is already seven. Today I have to report early in the office. I haven't even taken tea. When will you cook? Come, get up. If you have a headache take some medicine," Satish again tried to make Rupa get up.

"Let it be seven. I can't get up now. My head is splitting. I haven't slept the whole night," Rupa complained covering her face. Satish is speechless. There seems a fire within him, increasing and decreasing his temperature. But inspite of it all he remains lying.

'Rascal, he'll take work from me but give all the benefits to Shobhakant, because he belongs to his own caste. I should keep on selecting numbers...keep on meddling with digits, while others suckle prose. Everyday Shobhakant sucks the green currency notes. And, I stupid Satish should be riddled with report-returns. I should prepare the balance sheet of the office but the M.D. doesn't care that the balance sheet of my home is getting totally ruined. I was much better in the district office. There was some extra income too.

'How happy I was. Rupa also was keeping good health. Always slippery like a wet fish. If I would try to take her in my arms she would slip out. What a beauty Rupa was! I wanted that she always be near me. If ever

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she came to my mind in the office, the whole room used to be filled with her fragrance. And how I loved my work too! I would not know when dusk fell. And when I came home with filled pocket how affectionately Rupa welcomed me. How lovely were the mornings those days...'

"Has your headache lessened. I don't know why headache troubles you so much. It troubles you too frequently these days. I will take you to a doctor in the evening. Now it will not do without consulting a doctor."

"No, there is no need. What will a doctor do? This ache is not going to leave. It will go with my life. I wish I could die so that I could cross over this sea of suffering."

"If death is in your hands, then die. You always talk of dying. There is treatment for every pain," he consoled.

"For how many diseases will you get me treated? Headache, toothache, leg-ache, heart-ache... How many aches can you get treated? Which doctor can treat that person whose whole body is full of aches and pains? Tell me!" Rupa retorts and sits back in excitement. He reacts, groaning, "You don't have any pain. Actually, it is all your tantrum. In fact you have bred all the aches in your mind. If you remove aches from your mind, it will leave your body, too." Satish is almost angry now.

"Oh yes. I have bred all aches in my heart. I am habituated of breeding aches. I have got fascinated with aches...," Rupa keeps on muttering with agitation and anger. Satish feels sick. He feels like vomitting.

"Why should you be fascinated with aches? Reality is that you are under the spell of money. I should keep on bringing fair or unfair money and spend lavishly. You didn't have any ache till there was extra income but now you feel difficulty in running the household on bare salary in the capital city, so you have developed all the aches. Today, if extra income pours in, all your aches will vanish," Satish spoke in a single breath. His statement made Rupa turn blue with anger. Her eyes started moving like that of a snake. "Absolutely right. I am under the spell of money. But who got me addicted to it? Who made me hungry for it? I never told you ever to earn through unfair means. I didn't ask you ever to buy fridge, T.V, fan and sofa-set for home or asked you to buy me piles of silk sarees. Even if I would dissuade you from buying, you used to laugh it off. You told me that if God gives He gives a houseful. I was a daughter of a poor man. I knew how to survive in poverty. Who got me accustomed to these comforts?" Rupa went on. "You get one habituated to something, you get one fascinated towards something, you get one hungry and then say I can't give you anything. I can do nothing. Did I worship Tusari for such a husband? Did I worship Gauri for this? Much better is Surji's husband who sells nuts and brings back money. Surji herself works as a domestic help in a few houses. How happy

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a family is they! All of them work and remain happy. You don't want to work without illegal gratification. You don't get involved in any thing mentally without illegal gratification. You don't want to do even genuine work. Genuine relations are also left behind. Just try to recall when you last touched my body." Rupa kept on speaking. But Satish was amazed to listen to what Rupa was speaking. He realized that hankering after comforts had turned him impotent. But he is not the M.D. He can't even become an M.D. A desire to become like an M.D had turned him to an object today. He is feeling weak. He gripped Rupa's hand tightly...

Translated from Maithili by Pramod Kumar Jha

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The Book of Destiny

B.M. Zuhara

Only intense darkness can be seen within eye-reach. Chill crawls from thumb onwards. It has been a long time since I've been struggling with my arms and limbs in the deep sea. Still no hand extends for help. I will now plunge deeper. As soon as I looked down I trembled in shock. A very huge hand had grasped my legs. That hand started to descend with me piercing the land and the sea. A flaring heap of fire is seen underneath. The pitiable cries of the people scorching in that...Snakes, scorpions and worms are seen crawling. I shook my leg vigorously when a cobra crawled on to it. I got released from the grasp of a giant. I swam with force. A piece of thin light is seen far away. Now I don't feel cold. The darkness engulfing me has vanished. Only a dim light is seen all around now.

I had been trying very hard to open my eyes, which had been sealed and closed. Did my body shake when light fell on my eyes as if I had-received a shock? Are there some distinct forms around me? They have lined up with helping hands for my safety. One rubs my body after pulling me out to the bank and took care of me. Should I say at least a word of thanks to them? Is there anybody who is acquainted with me in this group? Trying hard I glanced all around. I have seen this face somewhere. Who is that? Are these the hands that saved me from the deep sea?

Even though I opened my eyes the chain on my legs and hands did not loosen. It is becoming tight. I cannot not turn over. I feel suffocated. I feel as if somebody has placed a rock on my chest. Not one but a thousand worms are wriggling in my throat. It feels as if dragonflies have built their nest in my chest and honeybees are humming while I breathe. Here comes a snake and a scorpion crawling on my bed. Snakes get intertwined on my leg. I am afraid of snakes. If only anyone could save me... I rolled my head without getting words to speak.

"Ayisha, do you recoginse me....?"

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A familiar compassionate face examined my pulse holding my wrist. "Oh! My God!..."

Why does he hesitate like this?

"She is sinking...It will be better to inform her husband." Another person was talking unemotionally. "No, sir...let us put her on ventilation..."

"Is there any hope, doctor?"

"Let us see. Sister...quick...."

Now I can hear and see but can't speak. I have the recollection of having seen somewhere the person who called my name. Who is that and where have I seen him? Again I feel drumbeats on my chest. Somebody has pressed down in the cavity of my throat. '*La ilaha il Allah....Muhammadu Rasul Ullah....*' Did I say that? I don't know. My voice may not be coming out. But my tongue chants Kalima...

"Oh God! Things are going to be difficult...." Who said that?

Now I see the forms around me running frantically in the dim light. Their conversations too fall in my ears. They are inserting needles almost everywhere in my body. They are clipping something on the fingers of my hand. Somebody slowly separated my lips. Did they forcefully open my mouth to pour *zamzam* water? I have kept the sacred water from Mecca securely in a plastic bottle sticking the name slip on it, inside the glass Almirah in the dining room at home. I opened my mouth trying hard. But they pushed a tube into my throat instead of the *zamzam* water. No, I must chant Kalima. Believers should die chanting invariable the Kalima, '*La ilaha il Allah Muhammadu Rasul Ullah*'. Only then can one gain the Book of Destiny in the right hand on the Judgement Day. People who gain the Book of Destiny on the right hand are the ones who achieve success. The garden of heaven where streams flow downwards is for them alone. There is a Malak on the left and right sides of men to record the doings of each without leaving out a word. Man may be forgetful, but Malaks aren't. If it happened somehow, his eyes, ears, hands, legs and tongue will give evidence against him on the Judgement Day. 'Rubbe', please give me the Book of Destiny on my right hand. Let my organs give evidence in my favour. Let my last word be the Kalima, '*La ilaha il Allah Muhammadu Rasul Ullah*'. Please include me with the one's on the right hand side.' Please free me from the fire of hell...I used to pray five times like this to Allah, did I not? When I went for Hajj, did I not pray my heart melting in the Arafat maidan where we get the answers for our prayers.

Doctor, please...please leave me alone ending this agitation. Let me pray....Only then will there be light in my Khabar...

My tongue had been stating these. The tube was descending through

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my throat. My breathing trouble is over. Fatigue too became less. Even when the uneasiness of my body became less my mind remained turbulent. Some sort of a fear enveloped me. I wanted to speak out something, but my tongue was numb.

"Ayisha, are you leaving because I offended you?" Who is crying? I tried to open my eyes, but couldn't. I recognized my husband's face in the dim light. Suddenly somebody fell on my chest sobbing... "Umma...without seeing me..." Even I could not bear the sorrow when my son cried embracing me. The call 'My son' came on my tongue, which tried to chant Kalima. When he cried embracing me, milk oozed out from my breast. My hands longed to console him by embracing him. Would I go without bidding farewell to your Bappa...Even if my lips moved, words did not come out.

"Afsal...don't disturb her...come..." Someone separated my son from me. By then my forehead felt hot by the tear-stained kiss by my husband. Rubbe...I am not able to pacify them.

'Uncle, my Umma...."

Afsal continued sobbing.

My son has returned after one long year. I could not even say a word to him after he came home....my son.... words got entangled in my throat. I had been preparing to receive him for the last one week. I made all the sweetmeats he liked and kept them in bottles. I got up early in the morning at three o'clock and made breakfast. I got ready to go to the airport. What happened in between? Even if there is drowsiness still in my eyes and the body has not become entirely mine once again, there is light in my thought. My body is imprisoned. Although they continuously inserted needles into my body, they could not imprison my thoughts.

Yes...I am sitting in the drawing room downstairs waiting for my husband to come back after his bath. As soon as he had his tea and walked to the car shed, I walked to the front of the house with its keys after putting out the lights.

Even though it makes the sound 'Darr....Bharr....' the car does not start.

"It is getting very late. The flight will land at six o'clock." I was getting agitated.

"The car is not starting up."

He came out frustrated.

"Now what will we do? For a long time I've been telling you to change this useless vehicle."

I nagged him as usual.

"I don't do any smuggling to earn the kind of money to change vehicles every year."

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"There is no need to engage in smuggling to buy a new vehicle nowadays. If you approach the bank, loan papers will be sent home."

"And will you remit the money every month?"

"Our son promised to remit the money, didn't he?"

"I don't want to enjoy anyone's generosity like that."

"It is like, 'neither will you eat, nor would you let others' as the saying goes."

"Sure, I am like that. Whatever I do, I am always at fault...."

"I am not prepared to quarrel this morning. Let me see if there is any way to get to the airport."

Saying this I walked inside.

"The taxi will arrive with just a phone call."

What he said to pacify me made me angrier.

"Do you know how much money we have to pay?"

Did my voice go up?

"Isn't money for spending?"

"You don't have any compunction spending money unnecessarily like this. How much money do you spend every month for this useless car? You won't listen if I ask you to buy a new car instead."

"In that case you will have me exchanged too, saying that I have gone old."

"I want to have you exchanged too. But it is not possible..." I also did not give up when anger made my head hot.

While he was busy shouting at me, I went inside and phoned my brother to come immediately with his car.

"My brother will come with the car now."

I told my husband who had been standing at the doorway and scolding me.

"Nobody needs your help here. I will call a taxi and go...."

By the time the taxi had reached the courtyard of our house. While scolding me he must have called the taxi from his mobile.

"It is better that you go alone."

My words stuttered.

By that time I felt quite unwell, a sort of unusual headache. Not exactly pain, but a feeling of somebody pressing my head here and there. My B.P. may have increased. I take medicines for B.P. regularly.

"If you are not coming, don't come."

Saying this, he left in the car, the numbness of my head increased. He is like that. When he becomes obstinate he won't think twice. But I didn't expect this. If he would compel me to go with him. I thought I would take the B.P. tablets and go. But....by this time I felt my body getting

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exhausted, and severe pain in my arms. My body got immersed in sweat. I wanted to go inside and lie down. But my body was limp like a rag. 'Rubbe....' somehow I sat on a chair but fell.....

"Ayisha...."

I recognized my brother's voice....

I couldn't speak.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted when a needle was injected into my body. I felt like falling into a deep pit. I couldn't even find a vine-rope anywhere. Somebody pulls me down. I descend by knocking and colliding on the rocks. Now there is the smell of mud. There is dampness also. There is not even a drop of light. 'Tup'....I got to the bottom.... I am lying on coarse sand. Gravel stings here and there. Once I had lain down upon a coarse blanket on gravel in the tent at Arafat Maidan like this. But the place was full of light. Here there is only darkness. My body started getting wet. Worms and mites crawled over my body.... Isn't there anybody to save me? Ya Ilahi...A drop of light....

"Don't be afraid, we are here for company."

"Who are you?"

"Munkar and Nakir. We have come to question you. Only those people who give correct answers to our questions receive their *Book of Destiny* on their right hand. Believers would have known all this beforehand."

The kindness in their words reduced my fear a little.

They stood on my right and left sides respectively.

Now I can hear their voices clearly.

"Ayisha...."

"How do you know my name?"

"We have the names of all the men and women in the world in our book. We will get the information after having each page torn. You need to answer only to what we ask. This is yout first test. Don't forget that this is the first obstacle to get the *Book of Destiny* on your right hand."

"ManRabbukka?"

"ManRasoolukka?"

"Mandeenukka?"

Questions came like arrows...The teacher in the madrasa had taught that the *Malaks* like Munkar and Nakir would come to question us, when we reach Khabar after our death. When we were young, if we showed laziness in worship and pretended false sickness to avoid going to the madrasa, our mother too used to frighten us saying this.

"Didn't you hear what we ask?"

The *Malaks* make haste.

"Tell quickly...We are in a hurry."

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"Earthquakes in Pakistan and Kashmir, Katrina and Rita in America, explosions at many places, attacks by suicide squads... battles, terrorists who kill the unblemished in the name of religion, train accidents, vehicle accidents, natural deaths in plenty... There is hardly any time. Every single person has been permitted there specific time. Only those who give correct answers within that time are eligible to be on the righthand side. Your time starts now."

"ManRubukka?"

"My 'Rubbe' is the *Alam(Owner)* who made the sky, the earth, 'Jin', 'Ins' and all the movable and immovable things. He is Almighty. He neither has any offspring nor is He anyone's."

I said somehow.

Does my voice come out, who knows!

"ManRasulukka?"

They have heard what I said. That is why they got to their next question.

"The final messenger of 'Allah Muhammadu Mustafa Rasulullahi Alaivasallam'..."

There was clarity in my words as I could say the right answer.

"Mandeenukka?"

"Islam Deen' who believes only in one God...."

The next question came without letting me complete.

"Manlmamukka?"

"The scripture Quran which Allah put down to Muhammed Nabi through Jibireel to cast light on the people. To welcome the good and to abandon the evil..."

They had disappeared while I was talking hurriedly. I opened my eyes slowly. Now there is no darkness around me. There is bright light. There is no burden of sin on my head. There are no chains on my body. I have no breathlessness. Even though my throat continues being parched, there are no worms crawling. Do my hands and legs move? A white form appears to be dozing in front of me. Now whatever I see has pure white colour. Would my voice come out?

"Oh God! It is really a miracle.....She has opened her eyes."

Yes...now I can see everything.....I can hear everything...

Translated from Malayalam by Shobha Nambudiripad

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Aditi

Nilakshi

This is my story. So you will be stumbling upon the narcissistic pronoun 'I' inordinately repetitively as you strain your intelligence along the text of this tale. My name is Aditi. If I revealed my surname, your mind would conjure a caste, creed, religion and a local to my name and the emotions I wish to deliberate upon in this narrative will be lost in such academic speculation. So let my first name suffice as introduction. That way, no matter which part of the world you are from, you can identify with the woman in this story with the woman within you.

Aditi is a Hindu name. But my father taught me to embrace all the good in all the religions of the world. My faith in God is beyond religious restrictions. My father said Max Muller's interpretation of my name is, 'the visible infinite, visible by the naked eye, the endless expanse beyond the earth, beyond the clouds, beyond the sky.' To my adoring father I am infinity.

Father taught me to explore the wonder of the world in the ecstatic creation of the Supreme Being—in the colourful blossoming of the striking fuchsia, the brilliant spikes of gladiolus, white, purple stars that flowered in our garden as asters, the flesh coloured carnation, the golden chrysanthemum, the flaming phlox and the stylish and scarlet salvia.

However, a young daughter is always a cause for bittersweet happiness for the parent(s)—if the offspring is blessed with both the parents living. Being without a wife made him an even more conscientious parent. So with all the good intentions throbbing in my father's heart, I was married off with great fanfare at the ripe old age of seventeen. A constitutionally illegal chronological age to wed. But having devoured voluminous volumes curled up on the sofa in my father's study, I was a much-learned seventeen-year-old. Far mature than required of a feme-covert.

"She will continue to wear western attire after her marriage." Was it such an issue to be stressed upon I wondered. "And no babies for five

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years. She must complete her studies." "Of course", smiled my husband-to-be. "She can study and even work should she wish. There's no question of children for the next five years."

My mother-in-law-to-be looked askance, desiring to express a thought. But was silenced by a brief look from her son. My father, not possessing what I believe to be my womanly instincts missed the exchange. The marriage was finalized.

A month later I was pregnant with my first child. But suffered a miscarriage in the first trimester itself. I had read in a medical journal that by the end of the first trimester, which is about week twelve of pregnancy, the foetus has a recognizable human form. Being a motherless girl I felt increasingly handicapped in dealing with my new state of affairs despite my educated upbringing. (Or was it because of it?) I took a little time breaking into the mould of an acceptable daughter-in-law. Prattling before my father about being mistreated by my sisters-in-law who were so much older than me, I was firmly reproved of failing to live up to his expectations of a responsible daughter. My father's advice was that as a married woman I was no longer to think like a seventeen year old but always behave as the mother of all-even an eighty-year-old if need be. He never tired quoting Kalidas' writing 'On becoming a wife" from the masterpiece *Shakuntala*, translated to English by A.W.Ryder:

> My child, when you have entered your husband's home,
> Obey your elders and be very kind
> To rivals, never be perversely blind
> And with your husband, even though he
> Should prove less faithful than a man might be;
> Be as courteous to servants as you may.
> Not puffed with pride in this your happy day:
> Thus does a woman grow into a wife
> But self-willed woman are the curse of life.

It was not always easy to mould myself to my father's expectations. At times a little beast inside my heart protested. Sometimes the monster growled like a big demon instigating me to rebel. But I just had to close my eyes and father's trusting visage would appear before me. 'Learn to give, my little one. For there is no greater beauty than a woman giving love, care, understanding-unreservedly.'

His profound words would successfully expose the pettiness of any situation I was making a mountain of. And the problem would miraculously

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work itself out. For there was never a problem, never a wrong, never a sin. Everything was a creation in my mind. Being infinite I had the power to destroy the negative thoughts creeping dangerously into my disciplined mind. With a simple formula my father had armed me always to be a winner.

Arranged marriages, which are looked upon with so much awe and curiosity by the Western world has a long and enduring track record in India. I was fortunate in that my husband was not a habitual wife-beater or a drunkard or chain smoker. At any age in human history, when the male is without these vices, he is considered to be a good example of his breed. Furthermore, he was very handsome. Most importantly, he belonged to the moneyed background similar to mine. So the nightmarish question of having to adjust to a lower social echelon never rose its ugly head either.

That elusively quintessence tie of love separates all strong bonds from the others. For love to flow our presence needs to be appreciated and that appreciation needs to be reciprocated. Then love doubles. On this premise, many times have I questioned the correctness of my situation. "Daddy, isn't it wrong to live with a man who doesn't want you in his life unconditionally?"

And my father would evade the issue with his didactic viewpoint. "Can we stop wanting a part of us at any time in our lives'? Marriage needs as much hard work as your studies or your profession. The golden rule is that your psyche should always be filled with pleasant thoughts. Be open-minded to forever improve upon even your best when confronted with constructive criticism. Remember, none can trample upon you for you were born to triumph."

Yes. I triumphed. Like a woman does. Everywhere and always. My father must have left no stone unturned in my upbringing. My husband discovered he could not do without my constant presence in his life. While he had been sizing me up, I had woven and entwined my existence within him without either of us consciously being aware of it.

One day he returned almost stamping his feet and ballooning his face, flinging his files on the floor before throwing himself on the bed. Refusing to voice what the tragedy was. A repetition of this scene made me decide to probe into and settle the matter once and for all. A grudging revelation from the man I had so often trembled to face overwhelmed me. He needed to gaze into my countenance every morning when he left home. The day I didn't walk along with him towards the door wearing a smiling expression, he automatically switched off mentally.

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'A wife is the constant and sacred source of life.' My father had once quoted. Was this what he had meant?

Perhaps our lives would have meandered along its journey to eternity had not beauty personified in the body of a woman named Saloni descended upon our lives in all her voluptuous splendour from across the Atlantic Ocean within three years of our marriage. One look at her and for the first time in my life I wished I had been born strikingly beautiful. My husband's unwavering glance from her only heightened that yearning.

She remained with us. She was the daughter of a very dear friend of my father. She was the same age as my husband. She was unmarried. She had been too busy building her career to concentrate on any long-term relationship. Being alone in the city she was entrusted upon us as our responsibility.

I wonder if my father would have been quite so resolute on her staying with us had he actually seen and met Saloni. The last time he had met his friend was during their schooldays when they had studied together in the same school. And from what I could tell from the photographs Saloni carried with her, the pot-bellied curly haired dark man that was her father bore no resemblance to her. It was her mother Saloni needed to thank for bestowing upon her those stunning looks. Rather tall, with a gloriously curved figure, a spotlessly pearl pink complexion and every feature shaped to perfection. My poor husband would have to have been made of rock to remain unaffected by such an alluring sight living in constant close proximity.

It is not that my husband's love for me diminished once Saloni entered our lives. Far from it. In fact, he made an extra effort to shower and demonstrate a great fondness for me publicly even when it went against his very nature. He tried desperately hard to acknowledge and admire all the things in me worthy of appreciation. And when he was at a loss to elaborate upon my limited talents, he even resorted to fabricating and praising me on traits and characteristics I did not in fact possess. He tried very hard to present me as more than the woman I was in Saloni's presence. Witnessing his desperation I fervently wished I had a few more skills that he could boast his wife of possessing. Only then did it dawn on me what a favour he had done by marrying me. So typical of his well-meaning nature. Then again, was it necessary to reform oneself to attain appreciation? Won't life be that much simpler and happier if one were to be content with all that one's partner possessed?

Saloni always wore a charming smile in that lovely face of hers. Her eyes sympathized with me. She realized she was blessed in abundance with every attribute my husband so admired in a woman. My husband was aware of it. I knew it.

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But we were all caught in this web of love, trust and faith. My husband would never admit that he had actually fallen in love. He had forever ridiculed the concept of being nothing more than a figment of imagination of fools and philosophers. As for Saloni, how could she live with the guilt of stealing away the husband from the woman who had become such a dear friend? In that tangled mess of a triangle I could easily have claimed ignorance of the undercurrents and continued enjoying my position in sublime oblivion.

Life would not have come to a halt. Neither for Saloni nor for my husband and not for me either. Pain would have wretched Saloni's heart. My husband would have concentrated whole-heartedly on burying all those emotions surging within him. I would be the only one unaffected by it all. When Saloni left, I would once again become my husband's sole companion.

Unhappily. I knew I could not live with myself by snatching happiness. Of course I could patiently try to divert my husband's thoughts towards me. He would continue to look after me as he had done before. But it was no longer enough for me. I had glimpsed a yearning portrayed in his eyes when he gazed at Saloni. A look he had failed to control even with his iron-willed determination. Could I carry on enjoying the benefits of being his wife merely because he had married me before love had come to him? Not when I discovered that an endless list of sacrifices, compromises and self-improvement programmes were not required for him to fall in love. He had been trying all these years to change me into the woman Saloni already was. Although we did not wish to admit it because it would in a sense mean a colossal failure: we were both tired. Very tired. Trying to be what we were not. Actually.

My father will of course bend his head in grief and shame when he sees me at his doorstep with my bulging suitcase. He may even call me a coward, an idiot with a defeatist attitude. He will illustrate with a hundred examples how marriages have survived bigger, more concrete storms and emerged victorious. He may well call me the female Momus. Like Momus; I too could not fault the perfection of my husband's Adonis body... But I am confident he will one day admit that happiness lies even in bequeathing upon others those who truly do not belong to us. Then he shall definitely admit that I have finally realized the infinite dimension of my name by letting go.

Reality contradicted my hypothesis in condemning my husband of a Pygmalion mindset. My intellect, flush with thoughts gained from the most brilliant minds whose works I have devoured all my life had failed to understand the simple truth that makes a man want to be with a woman every moment of his life. It took me a Saloni to grasp the depth of my

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husband's devotion. To realize that love is not a butterfly that flutters in gay abandon for a few weeks in springtime. How can an emotion that involves exploration and commitment of two souls ever be underestimated to a temporal triviality?

Needless to say, my husband followed me to my father's house as soon as he discovered I had left home. Looking at his haggard face that appeared to have aged over a decade within those twenty-four long hours I had been away, I realized father was right in his observation that my husband would not know how to continue living happily without me. In the final analysis, it was his love that possessed that infinite dimension compared to which all other experiences were but finite acts within it.

❑

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The Depraved Girl

Priyamvad

The falcon had a vigorous dive and almost neared the last part of the silver-cotton tree's branch on which rested the honeybee hive. This time he passed above the hive leaving the bees greatly perturbed. The poor things kept on flying all around for sometime. Their flight made the white eggs on the hive all the more visible. The falcon returned only a few moments after the first attack. He dived again. This time he had succeeded in plunging his claws into the hive and felling the whole lot of it on the ground. The falcon went up and above in the sky swimming and forcing hundreds of the bees to fly around all corners. The hive had fallen on the earth with all eggs scattered.

The man sitting under the thatched house was busy watching it all. After the fall of the hive he shouted, "*Vasant*[1] has set in. I'll sell it in the market tomorrow."

A woman was lying on the bare ground under the hut. A girl was busy cooking rice and potato. The smoke was peeping outside through the window.

"Why shout like this?" asked the woman in a feeble voice. " You have been idling since morning." The girl peeped through the window along with the smoke. The blue of the sky was glittering in the bright sun. The girl kept on staring at the blue brightness for a long time.

"The falcon has felled the beehive. I will go to sell *vasant*."

The woman refrained from uttering anything. She began to groan after sometime. There was a vague light of fire inside the hut. The dark, savorous face of the girl was sparkling in it. This also included the heat of her skin.

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1. The florists, that is, malis, have a custom of selling a blossomed marigold grown in a pot at the advent of the spring season in U.P. This flower is called *Vasant*.

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"When are you visiting the wizard?" asked the woman.

"After cooking this meal."

"You must bring the blind fish for me; the pain is killing me."

The girl gave a nod of approval.

"The wizard leaves the village very often. He is here right now. You had better see him right at this moment."

The girl kept on poking the fire keeping her face on her knees.

"See that you bring from there only one fish," said the woman in the same feeble voice.

"Mind you, there are gods lying dormant in the fish. You must not trifle in this matter."

The girl gave a mild laugh, which made the woman raise her head.

"Why are you giggling?"

"How can one trifle with blind fishes?" the girl replied laughing. Her body shook as she spoke. The blue brightness of the sky began to ooze out of her body. This sparkle filled the hut. The woman perceived the girl's shaking body and the oozing blue effulgence. Then she lay down and began to cough.

"Do you really believe you will be cured by the wizard's fish?" The girl asked the woman when the latter had stopped coughing.

"All are cured. He knows many mantras. He is the master. He owns a flute made up of a child's fingers. He has kept the Time imprisoned inside a pitcher in his hut. Weathers fight their battles on his palm. He blesses the fish with eyes and the god releases her. I had eaten this fish when I was carrying you in my womb." The mother ejaculated gasping slowly. "All our ancestors have eaten such fishes."

The girl lifted the pot from the hearth and poured the cooked food into another vessel.

"Eat this when it is cool a bit." The girl rose lifting a container from a corner.

"I am going to fetch the fish." The girl accosted the woman and touched her head sitting by her head's side.

"After selling *vasant* tomorrow we'll buy meat secretly from the market. I'll cook it then."

The woman caressed the girl's hair tenderly.

"This time when you menstruate you must tie five knots. In that case you will be able to listen to the talk of the five winds[2]. Your body has swelled with glitter, fragrance and flesh. The winds shall lead you in the right direction and tell you whose hearth you have to light."

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2. Some tribal communities cherish strange superstitions about life which can be described as occult

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The girl pressed the woman's hand and rose after sometime to set out for her destination.

Coming out of the house the girl cast her glance upon the man.

He was probably asleep stretching on the floor. Froth had settled on both corners of his lips. The bees were still hovering around the tree with their eggs scattered on the ground. The falcon was hidden somewhere in the distance. The girl was surrounded by the glitter of the sun...stillness.... the five winds.

The girl's hut was situated at a certain distance from the muhalla. The cave of the blind fishes was beyond her locality. The girl entered the muhalla walking on a track. She encountered an old woman sitting under a large tree. The woman had a crop of snow-white hair, sharp, penetrating eyes and all her teeth were intact. She beckoned the girl after she was visible. Leaving the track the girl accosted her and her container was dangling about her hand.

"Where are you going?" asked the woman. She had a blabbing lip and talked to every passerby.

"To fetch the blind fish and then to the wizard's." The girl squatted near her.

"I see. Has your mother conceived again?"

The girl was quite tightlipped.

"What have you cooked."

"Potato and rice."

"Where from did you bring the ration?"

"I bartered it for firewood with the snake charmer's wife. She is unable to walk, you know!"

"You should have brought me too a little bit. It is a long time since...."

"When I cook again I'll certainly bring some for you. What's your age?" asked the girl.

"Why?"

"What's the age of the wizard?"

"I don't really know. My mother was telling that my grand mother was without an issue. Then the same wizard did the miracle. But he warned; you must not catch more than one fish there!"

"Why is it that fishes are blind?" asked the girl.

"Since the creation that cave has been without any light. The fishes of the pond do not need light any more. They do not know the pure and simple meaning of eyes. They are born blind through generations. If ever a normal fish is born with eyes she remits a characteristic smell from her body and the rest of the blindfishes lose no time in killing her. They cannot stand the notion of putting up with anybody craving for light. They feel

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only darkness; the blindness is real, natural and normal. Their whole world is confined to that blind pond. They refuse to believe that water exists in rivers, in waterfalls or anywhere else that it expands in a large space and in huge quantity." The old woman had a sigh, straightened her knees and resumed talking.

"The wizard has the amazing power to lend eyes to the blind fish. The crux of the matter is that the eater of a blindfish turns blind too. That is the reason why you should catch only one fish." The old woman fell silent. So did the young girl.

The old woman measured the girl from top to bottom with her eyes.

"If you are longing for a good groom do cover a snake and dress it in a cloth." The woman gave a laugh.

The girl kept her lips sealed. She cast her glance upon the surroundings. A naked woman was ploughing a field nearby[3]. The husk of her food grains is very thick. But she has discarded all her clothes. The husk will be certainly very thin now onward." The woman observed looking at the girl.

"Listen." The woman slightly bent toward the girl. Her mellow voice was turned into a whisper.

"When I was your age I too smelled like a spike of corn. Those days the headman's father used to haunt me. It is no joke to lay your hand upon the grave of twin children. There is one in the valley, the only one. The lover would hand over some soil from that grave and I would keep this under my parents' bed. This would leave them dead like the twin children. And then my lover would pass the whole night with me." Now her whisper had changed into a normal voice. "But he doesn't give me damn any more. Which fool has the guts to keep an old she goat? If someone gives you the soil of the twin children's grave refrain from keeping it under your parents' bed. Although your good days have come. Someday a boy of the muhalla will certainly win you." The girl looked at the old woman. In her she first found the image of each and every woman of the muhalla, then of the mother and lastly of herself. The girl felt mortally afraid.

The girl excused herself and proceeded to her mission. She caught the track again.

The same type of smoke that she had left behind her hut too enveloped the other huts of the muhalla. It resembled a flight of herons. She saw droves of she goats and chickens wandering about outside. She encountered half naked women, half naked men, stark naked children

3. Priyamvad weaves a world of myth, magic and reality in his narrative. But, here he is probably suggesting consciously or otherwise that there is a famine in that area and the naked women tilling lands would shame Indra, the god of rain, into action.

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seated in the sun, dozing off, rubbing the dirt off their body, talking at the top of their voice.

The girl emerged out of the muhalla walking along the track with her head bowed. She was entering the region from where the forest had begun. A layer of dust had settled on the thick leaves. The fierce wind of the noon lifted the dust so high that it hid the trees. The number of the rows of the tress on both sides had begun to increase.

The girl now abandoned the track. She came down into the heart of the jungle where it was extremely dense so much so that the sun was obstructed. A few steps ahead lay a small cave. Its mouth was hidden behind the trees. All people of the muhalla were familiar with the cave of the blind fishes. Their generations had grown along with these creatures. They were also familiar with their blindness as they were with their body, soul, their past and their beliefs.

The girl had already visited the place along with her mother.

The girl paused at the mouth of the cave. She made her eyes accustomed to darkness in this process. She could slowly perceive the dim light of the cave. The leaking water by eroding the stones since ages had engraved on them a motley variety of shapes. The people of that locality used to worship those images according to their respective necessities. There was no trace of light inside the cave. You could traverse some distance inside in the light of the opening.

The girl was quite accustomed. Taking the support of the wall she proceeded slowly. Her fingers used to clutch the shapes engraved up and down the stones. The darkness was intensifying as she proceeded. She was familiar with the turn the cave took after a certain distance. Walking along the wall the girl took a turn. There was all silence prevailing in the atmosphere. If you listened intently you could hear the sound of the fishes busy swimming at the bottom of the water. The girl was now proceeding with the help of the sound. Her feet could gradually feel the slope of the cave now. She began to descend into the water by fixing her feet firmly. First her heels went inside the water, then a portion of her legs. The girl felt the touch of the fishes about her skin. One of her hands was still resting on the wall. The other hand was holding the container. She leant downward keeping her hand on the wall still. She plunged the container into the water and lifted it out after keeping it inside for sometime. The container was filled with water. She let the fishes go back to the water one by one till only one fish was left inside the container. Now she took the support of the wall with one hand. She took a turn holding the container in the other hand. She was coming out of the cave in the same manner. She could perceive the vague light and then the normal light and the cave's door after

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sometime. She peeped into the container in the bright light. There lay a tiny fish inside. The girl had a deep sigh. She withdrew her hand from the wall and came to the cave's door after sometime. She could see the light outside. She lifted the container with her both hands. She brought it in front of her eyes and perceived the eyes of the fish. The fish was restless in the light trying to hide her in the bottom of the water. She was trembling in this large and wide world. After observing the fish for a moment she covered the mouth of the container with her palm making the darkness prevail. She kept the container cover thus while crossing the forest.

The wizard's hut was situated across the river. The girl took a turn and proceeded towards the river.

The river was blue. The girl paused to wonder where she had seen that blueness. She could recollect now; this blueness was present in the sky and this entered her body from there. The girl stood in the middle of the river digging her toes in. The river was not very deep but quite wide. Its water flew over the gravelly earth. The hill ended after a certain distance and the river turned into a waterfall. You could hear the noise of the waterfall from the muhalla.

The girl kept standing in the river for sometime. The cold water was touching her feet. She watched the gravels under the water adroitly. The scum on the gravel made her feet slip. She proceeded slowly trampling upon the gravels in an accustomed manner.

The level of the whole river-water did not come above the knees. She had covered the mouth of the container with her hand. She had an apprehension that the fish might die of the light. The water was coming to her knees. The clothes covered the part above the knees. The girl kept on crossing the river watching, trembling and taking care of herself. After sometime she succeeded in crossing the river.

After she was through she stopped at the stones. The water about her feet began to dry quickly in the sun. She revolved her head in all directions and felt the long, empty seclusion filled with silence. Only the leaves had a touch of the wind's finger and the mild noise of the waterfall.

The wizard's hut was visible now. It was the largest in that locality and was surrounded by redcoloured flowers.

"These flowers are watered by the blood of the fairies. That is why they are so red." The old woman used to tell people.

She had visited the wizard along with her mother even before.

After that the woman gave birth to three children. But none of them could survive. Then her mother visited the sorcerer. This time the sorcerer had advised her mother to eat the blind fish. The mother had conceived again. The girl had brought the fish.

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The girl stopped outside the hut. The noon sun was getting sharper. The hut was shining in the sun. The wizard emerged from the hut after a while. The girl genuflected to the ground. The container was still covered by her hand.

"Have you brought the stuff?' Asked the wizard. White locks of hair covered his whole face. His waist was slightly bent. The girl gave a nod. The old man extended his hand and the girl handed over the container. He went inside. The girl settled down there at one stone. Her feet were covered by soil along with water. She began to wipe it.

The wizard returned after some moments. He no longer held the container in his hand. The girl was dying to see his flute, his pitcher and also his palm. The old women had seen all these belongings of the wizard. He came and squatted near the girl. The girl noticed that he was groaning with pain while sitting. His body smelled of fish. He had probably blessed the fish with eyes.

"What happened? She asked the sorcerer.

"Where?" the wizard had a deep breath.

"What happened to the fish? I mean."

The wizard refrained from furnishing a reply. The girl too kept quiet. After scrubbing her toes she cleaned her fingers too that were smeared with clay.

"Why don't you bless all the fishes of the cave with eyes? There will be no birth of the blind fishes after that!" The girl inquired.

The sorcerer looked at the girl once and then he looked at the sky.

"No, no. To be blessed with eyes means to be blessed with liberty. This fish too will be killed after seeing the light of the day. That is why I am blessing her with light." After that the girl could get the meaning of whatever the wizard said in his own language. "The eye or the light means liberty. Liberty enables you to cherish dreams, to love, to die at your own sweet will."

The old man rose up. The girl's shadow was falling on the earth. The wizard was about to trample on the shadow. He retraced his steps.

"You must look sharp. Before your shadow grows larger than you, you have got to reach home. The merchant of the shadows is on the hunt for. He will usurp your shadow. He will take away your soul too."[4] The wizard went inside to fetch the container. The girl stood up and found that her shadow was still shorter than her. The old man had brought the container

4. Priyamvad has a knack of using a complex, symbolic and at times irrational language in the style of Lawrence and Yeats while he is busy weaving a tale of myth, mystery, reality and history. But this is all an unconscious process, for he never imitates any writer, Indian or foreign, consciously.

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from his hut and handed it over to the girl. The girl peeped inside to ensure that the fish was in the same position under the water.

"Go and feed your mother."

The girl was on her way back. She reached the river. She entered the river, waded through the water to a certain distance and then paused in the middle of the river. She cast her glance upon the fish inside the container and then upon the river water below. The cold water was flowing above her feet.

The girl looked at the fish once more. She felt the pungent smell of the fish. She spoke in her own language.

"You do have your eyes now, your light and your liberty. Go and cherish your dreams; love and choose death when you wish to die." The girl bent down and poured down the container water into the river. The fish rushed out of the container with force and flowing along with the current headed toward the waterfall. The girl for some moment kept on watching the swimming fish.

The girl looked around. She felt and enjoyed the sun spreading in all directions. She noticed the presence of the forest and the sky pervading the earth. The girl could realize that the sun, the forest, the river and the sky were limitless and infinite; they had far larger dimensions than those, which met the eye. The girl felt that the sun had descended into her body, the river into her veins, and the sky into her mind and the forest into her dreams.

"I too will run away with *Vasant* tomorrow" said the girl to all the five winds and she went forward treading on the slippery stones.

Translated from Hindi by Udai Bhanu Pandey

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An Impossible Wish

S. Krishnamoorthy Aithal

Taking a sharp look at his resume, Madhav noticed one serious lacuna. He had certainly an impressive record of teaching in two different continents, publications in scholarly international journals, and management of research projects, accomplishments not many in his profession could boast of. He had also made his modest contributions to national unity and world peace. However, he had no work to prove his involvement in community service—anything to show that he cared for his immediate neighbours. He was certainly not unthinking of the Beltway residents among whom he lived and worked. He did help elderly persons cross the street, gave rides to people waiting at bus stops in inclement weather, pressed dollar bills into the hands of the homeless, and so on. These are not the kinds of services you could include in your resume, are they?

As Madhav had decided to return to classroom teaching after a brief pause, he started looking for opportunities to do community work to make his resume formidable. An advertisement under the column "Community Services" in *The Washington Post* caught his attention. It said "AAA is interviewing volunteer candidates for the position of a companion to a terminally ill older adult with an index of low IADL living in a CCRC." Although he didn't have a clue what those abbreviations stood for, he knew that this would look great on a resume, and he went for the interview at the given time and place. The interview went very well and he got the job. During the interview, he learnt that he is to give company for certain hours of a week to an elderly person who is living in a local Nursing Home and who is suffering from serious physical illness and severe communication problems, difficulty in both being understood and understanding others. The work started the next day.

Madhav met his ward the next day in the Continuing Care Retirement Community (CCRC), not very far from where he lived. The gentleman, frail

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in body with an oxygen tube inserted into his nostrils, was lying in bed with his eyes closed. Mary, his wife, tried to wake him up to introduce his companion. The patient half-opened his eyes and quickly shut them. She described Tom's, her husband's, condition—severe mental disability, cognitive impairment, and low reading of Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADL) on the index which measured a client's ability and degree of independence in cognitive and social functioning. She said that he hardly ever spoke or responded. She was happy that the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) was able to find a professor of English to serve as a companion to her husband who was an English professor himself and a reputed Shakespeare scholar of his time. She thought that Madhav could get Tom interested in recent Shakespeare scholarship.

After introducing Tom, Mary kissed Tom on his cheek to say goodbye and left. Madhav drew his chair close to Tom's bed and tried to start a conversation, but Tom changed his side. Madhav took the chair to the other side of the bed. Tom turned to his original position. This game lasted for half an hour or so, and both appeared to enjoy it. Madhav said he had long experience of handling difficult students and that Tom had better give up his intransigency and join in a conversation. He gently pressed Tom's hand, brushed away Tom's hair from his eyes, and tickled his feet. Finally, Tom gave up, probably tired of changing sides. He still kept his eyes closed. Madhav presented his resume, and wanted to know if Tom could write a recommendation for him and if he could include Tom's name in his list of referees.

For a whole week, all of Madhav's efforts to make Tom speak produced no results. He felt that he had never faced a more challenging situation. Periodically, the nurse and other staff members walked in to check on the patient, and Madhav thought they were secretly enjoying the fun.

"Tom, you are lucky to have a sweet wife," Madhav said before going into Shakespearean territory during a visit the second week. "I wish my wife would take care of me like this when I grow old and show low score on the index of my IADL."

Tom opened his eyes for a second, and Madhav noticed they were burning red.

Madhav quickly changed his tune. "Tom, to tell you the truth, my wife is a shrew, an Amazon, and I would be pleased to see her dead when I return home today....."

Briefly for less than a second, Tom opened his eyes again. Madhav didn't fail to notice that the redness in the eyes was gone. Though pleased with his tactic, Madhav felt guilty, and moved on to another topic.

"I have only one child, a daughter," Madhav went on. "I guess I got

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busy annotating every word and line of Shakespeare, you know. At the very moment of orgasm, a word or a phrase of the bard of Stratford-upon-Avon would suddenly crash into my mind demanding immediate analysis or explanation, and the blood from between my loins would get diverted to the head....You think I am joking....No, I am serious. I hope you don't mind my being a little frivolous, do you? How many children do you have, by the way?"

Tom raised his hand a little and showed four fingers, then two, and finally three before he dropped his hand.

"Wow, you are a veritable Rabi Ben Ezra," Madhav exclaimed. "You have nine children! Four sons, two daughters, and three...." He realized he was on a wrong track. "You have four children by Mary, two children by your second wife, and three by your first wife, right?"

When he got no word or gesture in response, Madhav gave another try. "You have four children by your first wife, two by your second wife, and three by your present wife."

Again, there was no response. Madhav tried other possible permutations and combinations. At last, he stumbled upon the correct combination: "Four by your present wife, two by her previous marriage, and three by her earlier marriage."

The eyes opened and closed again. This time they stayed open a few seconds longer. Probably, Tom was pleased with his new companion and wanted to have a fuller view of the Deep Blue.

The following weeks, similar conversations took place. Tom would respond to a question by sign language, and during the rest of the duration of the meeting Madhav would keep on guessing the meaning until he received assent in some form or other. Gradually, Tom's eyes remained open for longer periods of time. However, whenever Mary dropped in, he quickly transitioned to a state of deep meditation with eyes closed until she left. Mary was pleased that Tom's reticence didn't tire Madhav, and she said that she thought Tom was enjoying Madhav's company.

"What is your name again?" Tom asked Madhav one day the fifth week, opening his eyes.

"My name is Madhav Madhusudan," Madhav said, and transcribed his name on a piece of paper in International Phonetic Script with stress marks in appropriate places.

Tom put aside the paper. "I know how to say Madhav without the help of your phonetic transcription. Isn't that the name of one of your Hindu gods? One of the many names of Lord Krishna?"

Madhav was overwhelmed that he finally succeeded in making Tom speak. He was also pleased with Tom's knowledge of the Hindu pantheon.

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And he saw Tom's eyes were still open and were full of gratitude and kindness.

The two soon became great friends. Tom eagerly waited for Madhav everyday. If Madhav reached a few minutes late, Tom would bitterly complain about his friend's lack of consideration. He would try every trick to hold him. Once he hid Madhav's car keys, and another day he developed severe chest pain when the time came for Madhav's departure. He persuaded Madhav to sleep on the sofa in the room and spend the night every now and then. He called Madhav to make sure he returned home safely, and called him throughout the day on one pretext or another. He wanted to eat Indian dishes and asked Madhav to bring him whenever his wife cooked some special dish. He wanted to meet Madhav's family. He ordered the nurse and the attending staff not to disturb whenever he was holding sessions with Madhav.

"Tom, if you don't mind, may I ask you why you are hard on Mary? I have never seen you speak a word to her. And you close your eyes whenever she comes in."

After a long pause, Tom said, chokingly, "No, I don't want to go into that painful subject. I won't also ask you why you hate your wife so much that you wish her dead, either."

Madhav was flabbergasted. "No, I don't wish my wife dead. Who told you that I do?"

Tom spoke with gentle sarcasm, "Sorry, I heard you wrong, then. I guess you said you worshipped her."

"Tom, that was a joke. I wanted to somehow unseal your lips that day," Madhav spoke unpersuasively.

In the meanwhile, Tom's health was deteriorating. Madhav wondered whether the endless friendly chatter was causing strain.

Day after day, Tom asked Madhav questions about Indian gods, religion, history and culture. He had taught courses in comparative literature and had a good knowledge of Sanskrit classics. He greatly appreciated the stories of strength, sacrifice, endurance, loyalty, perseverance, etc. narrated in ancient Indian legends and epics. He asked Madhav to bring him books from the library and to read to him to refresh his memory. He requested him to buy him pictures of Lord Krishna, playing on his flute and dancing with his lovers; Lord Hanuman sitting at the feet of Ram, Laxman and Sita; Lord Ganesh, engrossed in study of the scriptures; Kamadhenu, the cow goddess, the fulfiller of all desires; and of many others. Every time Madhav tried to change the conversation to Shakespeare, Tom would bring it back to Indian beliefs, customs, and manners.

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Whenever Mary happened to barge in, Tom became silent as usual and quickly closed his eyes.

One day Mary asked Madhav what play of Shakespeare they were discussing.

Not wanting to lie, Madhav simply smiled.

Mary understood this to mean that Madhav didn't want to comment on the declining powers of her husband's brain functions. She whispered into Madhav's ears that Tom had very few days left to live according to his physician. Madhav protested that the doctor's prognosis could be wrong.

Tom hid all the pictures and the books under his pillow or the bed sheet. While dusting the table near Tom's bed one day, Mary found the picture of Kamadhenu underneath the lamp stand. She took a look at it, and then threw it into the dustbin. Tom groaned in pain, and the groan became louder and louder. The nurse and the attending staff rushed in. Mary was puzzled. When Madhav restored the picture to its original place, Tom grew quiet. After a while Mary and everybody else left the room in great confusion.

As days passed Madhav became increasingly anxious about the way things were moving. The Nursing Home staff could be spying on him. He feared being charged of brainwashing Tom. He considered terminating his visits, but he couldn't bring himself to do so when Tom waited for him impatiently like a newly-wed bride.

Mary sensed that something was going wrong, but she couldn't figure out exactly what.

"You are blessed to be born a Hindu," Tom said one day. "I find great depth and beauty in Hinduism."

"Your religion is a great one too, spread around the globe," Madhav responded, wondering if Tom was trying to find out whether Madhav was a religious bigot.

"Spread around the globe with the help of the gun, more often than not," Tom remarked.

"Well, I believe God is one and is known by different names by different people, and all religions are equal," Madhav said, hoping to settle the issue amicably.

After a thoughtful pause, Tom said, "I wish Christians, Jews, and Muslims thought so too."

"I am not sure that they don't. It depends whom you ask," Madhav said.

"An occasional oral statement doesn't change what is written in books, carved in stone, does it?" Tom said.

"Hinduism has its flaws and blemishes too," Madhav said, trying to

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moderate Tom's enthusiasm. "You have heard about its rigid caste system, haven't you? Certainly, the practice of untouchability, thankfully forbidden by the Indian Constitution today, doesn't bring it much credit either."

"You forgot to mention *sati*, the horrible practice of the widow entering her husband's funeral pyre. I know some ignorant Westerners mention these to discredit Hinduism. If I am not mistaken," Tom continued, "none of these appear to be sanctioned by your religion."

Madhav felt uncomfortable to hear Tom disparage his own religion. He couldn't understand whether he was speaking thus to please him or whether he sincerely believed what he said. He couldn't agree that people only occasionally spoke and behaved in plain human terms. He had much experience of common humanity. Given a chance, he believed he could resolve many of the disputes between nations. Most of the times barriers rose, boundaries separated, and war broke out when economic interests clashed or personal honour came under attack. However, people everywhere had the basic virtue of acknowledging one another's right to live and the right to personal integrity. Even those considered evil would refuse to accept that they were robbers or they were insulting in their ways. Madhav believed that problems arose because of miscommunication.

Tom didn't buy Madhav's arguments. He thought Madhav was playing it safe. After a great deal of thought, he had come to the firm conclusion that Hinduism was like no other. If anyone wanted to understand it, they couldn't find its wisdom neatly stated in one holy book. It would require a study of scores of books—the *Vedas*, the *puranas*, the epics, and so on. What a rich and endless spiritual feast these books provided! Did one find anywhere else such examples of honesty, truthfulness, strength, courage, endurance, perseverance, sacrifice, loyalty, love, and kindness! How strange that even the wickedest of their characters were not completely devoid of these virtues! Even Ravan, the demon, was a saint in his own right, and he was worshipped by people in some parts of India. Tom was disappointed that Madhav refused to accept that he represented the best of the human spirit. Anyway, he was glad of the opportunity to discuss matters related to his deep interests. He felt no longer lonely.

It was no surprise that Tom's mind often turned to the fact of death. He brought up the matter many times in his discussion with Madhav and enquired about Indian customs and rituals related to death.

After learning that a traditional Hindu had the funeral rites performed as a kind of rehearsal or dry run on turning sixty, Tom wanted to have a ritual performance for himself. Madhav refused to give him any help in this regard. "Where would I find a priest here in this godless town to perform your *shastabdi*? Even if I found a priest, I doubt he would agree

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to perform the rite for a Christian. He could charge you a bundle. And Mary would surely kill me if she came to know any of this."

When Tom persisted and implored, Madhav tried to find ways to make Tom give up the idea. "Tom, you are seventy-eight, well past sixty. *Shastabdi* is performed when a person turns sixty. It is nearly twenty years late. Look, I am a Hindu, sixty-three going on to sixty-four, but I haven't performed my own *shastabdi*. Not many Hindus follow this practice these days. Be reasonable."

Tom refused to be reasonable. He threatened to observe *maunavrat*, silence. When that threat failed to move Madhav, he warned that he would go on a hunger strike. He knew of Mahatma Gandhi's powerful methods of *satyagraha* resistance.

Mary sensed tension in the air, but she had no inkling as to what was going on. She said she was going away the next day for a week to San Francisco to visit one of her sons.

With Mary out of the way, Madhav decided to yield to Tom's request. He contacted a priest after extensive research and explained to him the situation. The priest said that he had not performed a *shastabdi* for a Christian, but he would do so, if his friend insisted. However, his schedule was tight; during the following three months, he had a single slot available from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. the day after the next. Madhav negotiated the fee, and he said he would pick up the priest from his place. The priest gave Madhav what preparations were needed.

"You win, Tom. Please do not eat anything after 10 o'clock tomorrow, and early morning the day after tomorrow take your shower, and put on new clothes. I would bring the priest at 10:00 in the morning day after tomorrow."

Tom was excited with joy. He had numerous questions regarding preparations for the ritual. He announced that he was becoming a vegetarian. "No," he said, "it is not a hasty decision. I have given it serious thought for sometime. It seems so hypocritical to me when people swallow without pity whole hogs and cows and chickens and what not, and cry over destroying for research a few embryos which require a microscope to see them. By the way, I don't think I can invite anyone of my friends or relatives to participate in the event day after tomorrow. Please bring your wife and your daughter and her husband."

Madhav had no idea where all this would end. He wondered if Mary was spying on him, and her talk of going to San Francisco was a ploy to catch him red-handed. Before going to pick up the priest, he called Mary on cell phone, and she was, to his great relief, in San Francisco. Madhav

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said he called to find out if she reached safely so that he could convey this news to Tom when he met him later in the day.

The ceremony started punctually and ended on time with Madhav and the members of his family present. Tom profusely thanked everyone. Just as they had come, the guests left the place hastily. By this time the nurse and the attending staff had become very friendly with Madhav, particularly because their work was, with Madhav in attendance, greatly reduced.

Next day, Madhav was taken by alarm when Tom asked Madhav to show how to access his bank account online. Madhav dodged giving a tutorial saying that Tom needed a Password, PIN number and other information in order to access his account. He doubted if Tom's computer was connected to the Internet. The following day of his visit, Tom said he had collected all the needed information and he had also verified that he had Internet access. Reluctantly, Madhav logged on to the website of Chevy Chase Bank, asked him to personally enter the confidential information. Tom gave the Password and the PIN to Madhav to proceed. Without any choice, Madhav opened Tom's account and was astonished what he saw. The bank balance ran from margin to margin.

"Tom, why are you keeping so much money in your checking account? It is not safe for one thing, and, another, you earn so little by way of interest," Madhav said.

"I like it the way it is," Tom replied. "If you ask me, the checking account is the safest way to keep one's money. Haven't you heard how people who buy stocks and bonds to multiply their wealth have lost everything? Why blame Ken Lay and try to send him to prison? Is it fair to expect Ken Lay to pay you $1000 for $10 of your investment? How many people and for how long can expect to take home that kind of money? Anyway, I keep all my money in one place lest I should forget in old age where my money is. Secondly, the money in a checking account is available anytime I want it."

"You don't need to keep all this money to meet an emergency, do you? The American capitalist economy would collapse if others followed your example," Madhav said humorously. "You may even be treated as a traitor if you publish your economic philosophy."

"I owe you money for all your services" Tom said. "I don't know how much my *shastabdi* cost you. Please transfer to your account a good amount. Why are you looking out for a job? Here's plenty. Take it. They say you can transfer money by a click of a button. Please go ahead or show me how to do it."

"Thank you, Tom, for your generous offer, but I can't accept it. I

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am a volunteer. My services are for free. The expenses on your *shastabdi* are on me," said Madhav and quickly logged out.

Tom groaned. He said that Madhav could help himself to his savings freely. He wanted Madhav to keep the Password and the PIN. Madhav vehemently refused to take advantage of his friend's generosity. He said he didn't want the FBI to deport him on charges of fraud, and he was going to do the yoga of *shavasan* later in the evening after reaching home to remove from memory the Password and the PIN.

When Madhav visited Tom after a gap of a couple of days, he found his friend's condition was worsening. However, there was no abatement to Tom's will to reform himself into a new being. He had prepared and signed a statement saying that he wished to be cremated after his death. Madhav expressed his doubt whether Mary would give her consent.

"I am talking about my cremation, not Mary's. Let her mummify and build herself a pyramid, if she wants and I don't care. It is insane to embalm the corpse and put it in a coffin to delay its integration with nature. I want my body to be quickly cremated after death and allowed a speedy return to Mother Nature. I know Mary would have no objections to my cremation; it costs her a lot less money to cremate me than to buy a coffin, mortgage a plot of land, and dig a grave."

Tom called Madhav the next day and wanted to make sure that he was paying his visit according to schedule.

"What is your demand today?" asked Madhav as soon as he met Tom.

"Madhav, I am sorry if I bothered you with my endless demands. I have one final wish, one last prayer. I don't know if you are aware of this or not. I know you are sent to me by God to deliver me from shackles of ignorance and superstition. I want to die a Hindu. Please convert me to Hinduism."

"Tom, I am afraid there is no way you could become a Hindu," Madhav cautioned him. "You must know that Hindus are not in evangelical business. It is also not very easy for a Hindu to convert into another religion. The person remains a Hindu, although he may wear a cross or grow a beard. So there is sure disappointment in the end, if you pursue this line of thinking."

"What more do you want me to do to be a Hindu?" Tom questioned petulantly. "I have embraced vegetarianism, performed *shastabdi* according to custom, and willed that I be cremated after my death. I wear a holy thread, too, see! I am prepared to do anything else required by Hinduism. The US Constitution gives me freedom to practice any religion. It is my fundamental right. This is my last wish, and I implore you to help me fulfill this one last wish."

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Madhav said, firmly, "I don't question your arguments or intentions. I readily admit that you are fully qualified to be a Hindu. Unfortunately, there is no procedure by which such a conversion can be formalized. There is not one single instance of conversion in the entire history of Hinduism, as far as I know. A person could only be born a Hindu. Tom, please take my advice and abandon your desire."

The words sounded cruel, callous to Madhav's own ears. Couldn't he have sprinkled some Potomac water on Tom's head and pronounced, "I declare you a Hindu?" Madhav shuddered at the very thought. He would have aroused the wrath of the Christian God for taking advantage of a person suffering from mental debility. In a flash of revelation, it occurred to him that Hinduism probably recognized the chances of war between gods on account of conversion and the ancient Hindu seers in their deep wisdom formulated the doctrine *swadharma paramo dharma* to establish peace among people of different faiths. If all religions are equally supreme as the doctrine states, where is room for anyone to fight for supremacy of the one over the other?

"Couldn't you write to one of your Shankaracharyas to find a way out? With help from Lord Ganesh, it may be possible to overcome the obstacles. I wish I had more time," Tom moaned.

Madhav reassured his friend that he was improving in health and wanted him to keep a positive attitude.

"I hope I will be born a Hindu in my next birth," Tom said, earnestly.

"Whether you take birth as a Hindu, a Christian, or a Muslim, I wish to be born your friend," Madhav responded warmly and pressed Tom's hand.

Tom wanted to stand up and give Madhav a hug. The nurse and the attending staff came in to help. In Madhav's warm embrace, Tom suddenly collapsed and died. In deference to his wish, Tom was cremated. Mary had no objection to Madhav's request if a Hindu priest could participate in the last rites. Madhav collected Tom's ashes and immersed them in the Potomac. He made sure that Mary immediately notified Chevy Chase Bank of Tom's death and terminated Internet access to his account. He continued to send out his original resume for a job with the column for community services left blank, for he felt it was sacrilege to use Tom's memory for any material gain.

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Far From Madhupur

Sheelbhadra

It is hard for a man to talk about his birth-place with equanimity. It's still harder if he is far away from the place for a pretty long time. The picture of the place which he carries in his mind is an old and faded one and doesn't resemble the place as it is now.

I'm out of touch with the changes which have taken place in Madhupur during my absence. On rare occasions when I go there I don't see the sights I expect to see and I don't get the warm welcome which I expect from the people of Madhupur. But I also know that it's not possible. I'm no longer an inseparable part of Madhupur and I've no role in the day-to-day routine of the place. I'm an outsider. Madhupur is going along nicely without me and it'll continue to do so.

The picture of Madhupur I've with me is several decades old. Madhupur is, certainly, not static and in the rapidly changing world the people of Madhupur have also changed. I'm aware of this but can't accept the fact with equanimity. The changes would have been there even if I'd lived in the place.

What about Guwahati? What did it look like when I was a student of Cotton College? Along with geographical changes there has been a great change in the mentality of its inhabitants. Today Guwahati is a big city, a B-class city. When we were students it couldn't be called even a town. It was just a village or a cluster of villages separated by empty spaces. The people who lived in Guwahati flocked together from different villages of Assam to earn their livelihood. They had their deep roots in the villages. Its culture, too, was rural, not urban. Guwahati, for most of its residents, was just a place of work. This was the situation of Guwahati or any other town of Assam till the advent of the Second World War. Then came the change with ever-increasing acceleration.

The change in the city is taking place while I'm in it. It doesn't seem

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to be so abrupt. If I had been in Madhupur I would have accepted the change as normal. When I think of Madhupur I think of its past. The memories of those days are still fresh in my mind.

There were two Sewali trees on either side of the sacred Tulasi plant in our courtyard in Madhupur. In the morning the ground was carpeted by a layer of white flowers dropping from the trees. I can still smell the flowers if I try.

Nobody is to blame for this. Madhupur reached its zenith in the early part of the Twentieth Century. It became a centre of education and culture. Then began the saga of its decadence. A ramshackle old hut does not draw the attention of people but the dilapidated condition of a majestic structure produces mixed feelings in the mind of the viewers. A feeling of sadness to see the evidence of the ultimate end of everything. "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings." What was the end? There may be a feeling of elation too. You exploited myriads of people to raise this grand structure. What was the ultimate end?

2

The Zamindar was the centre of all activities of Madhupur. The Brahmins in Madhupur are called Thakurs. At noon Krishna Thakur was on the roof of his thatched cowshed by the side of the road to bring down a creeper. On the previous day the Zamindar had shot dead a tiger in Alokjhari. This event was the subject of discussion in Madhupur that day. Krishna Thakur noticed Gagan Thakur passing along the road to his house.

He shouted from the roof, "Hi, where from?"

"I went to see the Alokjhari tiger. Such a huge tiger! A frightening sight."

"Where did you see it?"

"It's brought to the palace of the Zamindar on the back of an elephant. It took three shots to kill the tiger."

Krishna Thakur was furious. It was a slur on the reputation of the Zamindar as a hunter. He did not require more than one shot to fell a tiger. Krishna Thakur was not present on the scene, nor was Gagan Thakur. They started quarrelling furiously. One shot or three shots? In his excitement, Krishna Thakur lost his balance and rolled down on to the ground. He had to be confined to his bed for seven days due to backache.

The people of Madhupur called the Zamindar, Raja (king). Not even Raja but Rajabahadur. The honourable sobriquet Raja was conferred on the Zamindar by the British Government in appreciation of his charitable works.

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I might have told you about Felubabu on an earlier occasion. No harm in repeating it. He was the music and dance director of a well-known theatre of Kolkata. He came to Madhupur temporarily to train the members of Madhupur 'Natya Samiti'. It was a non-professional organisation patronised by the Zamindar, who met all its expenses. Some plays were staged from time to time. There was no entry fee for the audience. The members of the families of the Zamindar and other respectable persons performed in those plays. In those days ladies of respectable families did not perform on the stage. Males performed in female roles also. I haven't seen the stage performance of Sarat Dutta, a senior relative of mine. Older citizens spoke highly of him as an actor, specially in the role of Shajahan. His acting was as good as that of the best actor of Kolkata, they averred.

I saw the acting of Prafulla Dutta Choudhury, Bhudev Adhikary and some other talented actors of Madhupur. The eldest son of the Zamindar also used to take part in the plays. Later he became famous as a film director and an actor throughout India.

Robinda (Robin Adhikary) enacted in female roles very successfully. In his everyday life he was a serious person, rather taciturn. He had many other qualifications. He was an efficient football referee. If there was an important match in the district town, he was invariably invited to supervise the game. Robinda is gone. So are almost all the older persons of Madhupur who had an abundance of love and sympathy for me.

I met Felubabu in Kolkata for the last time after about twenty years when I had left Madhupur. Felubabu lived in a small outhouse in the spacious compound containing the palatial building of the Zamindar. The old Zamindar was dead and the financial condition of his successors was deteriorating fast. The main building was in a poor state for lack of maintenance.

I had been to Kolkata at that time for some personal business. In Kolkata I learnt that the wife of the younger son of the late Zamindar was in Kolkata at that time. So I went to the mansion of the Zamindar to call on her. She admonished me.

"So you're in a hotel. Why? Come to our place immediately. Such a huge building is lying vacant. There is no dearth of space."

I refused her invitation politely. I, too, stayed in this palatial building of the Zamindar occasionally in earlier days. It was so crowded. Now it was a deserted house. Those were the days of affluence and grandeur. Now the plaster was falling off the walls and the marble slabs of the floors were cracked. Dust and dirt everywhere and heaps of waste materials were lying here and there. I'd seen the days of glory when the numerous rooms of the imposing building were occupied by various people. Every person going from Madhupur to Kolkata was entitled to live there free of cost. When

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I went to Kolkata to study for my M.Sc degree I could not find accommodation in any postgraduate hostel. So I'd been there for a few days before an alternate arrangement could be made. Some of the occupants were permanent residents. In a city like Kolkata it was not a small thing to have free access to food and shelter. All the residents were not from Madhupur. Paresh Ghosh was an expert tabla player. Why was he there? It was not that there was no reason. If the Zamindar of Madhupur went to Kolkata he might invite some renowned exponent of classical music. There was Paresh Ghosh to accompany him with his tabla.

I started to draw a balance sheet. What did Felubabu get in his life? What did he lose? As long as Rajabahadur was alive he had no problem. He was a regular companion of Rajabahadur. He accompanied him to Kolkata, Puri, Benaras or to any other place where he went. The Zamindar provided him amply with all that he required.

The dramatic club of Madhupur was no longer there but Felubabu continued to stay there. He didn't possess any personal property and didn't feel it necessary too. A rootless person, a born itinerant. In the fag end of his life he took shelter in one of the many scattered outhouses in the compound of the Zamindar in Kolkata. He considered himself lucky that he was allowed to stay in the ramshackle outhouse.

Felubabu was very glad to meet me after such a long time. In fact he was overwhelmed with joy. I listened to his reminiscences of the past events of Madhupur. He talked of my father and shed a few drops of tears. Then there was a fusillade of questions. He wanted to know about everybody and everything of Madhupur. Where was this one living, what was that one doing? A string of random questions.

"What about Amal? Does he still sing? Or what?"

"How are you?" I managed to put in my question.

"Oh, I'm well. Very, very well. My stomach gives me some trouble occasionally. Otherwise I'm all right. I've no complaint."

I asked the wife of the son of the Zamindar.

"How does Felubabu maintain himself?"

"If he wants he can live very comfortably. He's well-acquainted with many important figures of Kolkata's show-business. People like him and respect him. A few of them even wanted him to live as their honoured guest. He had developed the mentality of a Zamindar. He had been with a Zamindar for such a long time. Occasionally they press something on him. He is pretty old and his stomach gives him trouble. He can't maintain his cleanliness. He cooks his food with a kerosene stove. If he prepares some nice item he offers a portion of it to me also. Though I'm not happy about it I can't refuse. He'll be pained."

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I'm eager to know about the events of bygone days. While I was in Kolkata I met Felubabu in the outhouse on several occasions. I never heard him complaining about anything. He had been in an important position in a renowned theatre of Kolkata before he went to Madhupur. If he continued in that position he might have been a well-known figure in India. He would have had his picture printed in newspapers.

"Do you regret it?" I asked him.

"No. I tell you frankly. I've no regrets. I was happy, extremely happy in Madhupur."

"Why did you go to Madhupur," I asked Felubabu.

"Rajabahadur told me that his eldest son was interested in staging some plays in Madhupur with his friends. He requested me to find a competent person to train the boys. I offered to go there myself. It'll be an outing for me. I fell in love with Madhupur. After a few months the son of the Zamindar lost his interest in it and went to Paris to learn cinematography. But I didn't return. I continued to stay there."

I've a great urge to know all about the Madhupur of bygone days. Almost all the people of the earlier era were dead and gone. Felubabu was one of the few surviving ones. My nostalgia made him sentimental.

"Do you know that I have a son?"

I was astonished. We all knew that Felubabu was not married.

Felubabu continued, "In those days the system was not prevalent elsewhere but females had already started acting in public stages in Kolkata. But they didn't come from respectable families.

They were recruited from the red-light district. Some of the girls were really talented. I belong to an old and conservative family of Kolkata. My wife also came from such a family."

Felubabu paused and then he seemed to take a difficult decision.

"My wife didn't like that I was associated with a theatre company. She didn't like the nature of the job I did. I was concerned mostly with girls. I had to demonstrate the steps to them. In doing so I had to touch them. Someone reported the matter to her with frills. She insisted that I give up the job. She started calling me a licentious person, a womaniser, even a pimp. On the other hand I couldn't live without dance and music and the ambience of a performing hall. After the birth of our son the situation became unbearable. She was convinced that her son too would start jumping into bed with any woman of easy virtue as soon as he became an adolescent, if he continued to live with a father like me. She was obsessed by the idea. She was wrong. I didn't have any physical relation with any of those girls. It was no use arguing with her. She went hysterical. She went back to her father's house with the one-year-old child and declared that she wouldn't return if I didn't give up my job as a music teacher. But as I've

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told you I couldn't live if I was separated from the theatre."

Felubabu became agitated. I was embarrassed. Why should he tell me all this? Possibly he wanted to lighten the burden he had been carrying all these years under the facade of cheerfulness.

Felubabu smiled weakly and continued.

"It isn't surprising. In those days there were many eccentric persons like me. We didn't want name, fame or even money. All that we wanted was complete involvement in our artistic pursuit. We were looked down upon even by the members of our family."

These are tales of a bygone era. Possibly feelings were more intense and more absorbing. We knew Felubabu as a jolly good fellow, always with a smiling face. I was silent. This, then, was why Felubabu had left Kolkata. How should I address the wife of Felubabu? Aunty or sister?

I asked him, "Is she still alive?"

Felubabu readily understood whom I meant.

"She died long ago."

"And the son?"

"He is quite well. You must have heard his name."

"But how? How could I have heard his name?"

"Why? Haven't you heard the name of Jivan Sen?"

"Why not? Jivan Sen is the controversial singer of Rabindra Sangeet. Some are all praise for him and some allege that he is distorting the original tunes."

"Have you ever met him?" I asked Felubabu.

"He comes here frequently. He has inherited my waywardness and my love of music. His maternal-grandfather was a rich man and his uncles' are fond of him but he lives in an attic of a hotel in Mirjapur street. He insists that I live with him. He tells me that he can afford to hire a room in a suitable place."

"What's holding you back? At your age, why are you living alone?"

"You'll not understand. I live here because the place is associated with the memory of Rajabahadur. Don't laugh at me. I feel some sort of a link with him. We sauntered together in the vast compound. I am grateful to his sons for allowing me to live in this outhouse. I don't know how long they'll retain the property. I hope that I'll die before the property is sold."

3

Different people have different aspirations. Hope keeps a man going. It sustains his life, inspires him to work and induces him to dream multicoloured

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dreams. But to live long may also be a bane. Hope withers and the dream is shattered.

When a young boy marches at the front of a procession shouting slogans he believes that he is going to change the world by his activities. If he is shot dead at that moment by the agents of law and order, the boy may be considered to be lucky. He dies with the dream still fresh in his mind. The French Revolution roused the common men. What was the ultimate end? What's happening in the socialist States? The communist revolution gave the suffering people a glimpse of light at the end of a dark tunnel. Where's that light? Mahatma Gandhi inspired the people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. He laid the greatest emphasis on ethical values. What about his followers who swear by his name? Now we see the naked exhibition of greed and lust. Insatiable hunger for power and money. They can adopt any means if it serves their purpose. Death, destruction, rape — everything is acceptable. Does every revolution end in a sordid drama? Can it be ever possible to create a comprehensive consciousness among the people of the world such that if a man laughs, there is a resonance in all minds and if a man cries all the people of the world become equally sad? No religion could do it, no philosophy could do it, no political ideology could do it. There might be some alternative. The world is not that old, I presume. Some formula may yet be discovered.

I go back to Madhupur again and again. A different ambience, a different way of life. Madhupur is a small place, or rather, it was a small place, isolated from others but self-sufficient. It didn't matter whether it was under the king of England or under the Raja or Rajabahadur of Madhupur. It is not possible to say whether the existing system was good or bad but the atmosphere of Madhupur was peaceful. The people were free from anxiety, at least those who were patronized by the Zamindar.

Innumerable snapshots. Each is different from the other but each is a genuine part of the whole. Each is a still of Madhupur of the bygone days.

There was a settlement of barbers, known as Napitpara by the side of the road which ran along the southern side of our house. During the rainy season I looked with envy at the boys of the settlement. It went completely under water. The boys plied rafts of banana trunks quite nonchalantly. It was such a great fun. If there was flood water in our compound we could have moved in such rafts. I remember Chandra Seal of Napitpara. Is he still alive? I doubt. He was older than me. He did everything except the job the members of his community normally did. In his boyhood he participated in the advertisement of bidis. A few boys dressed as girls, called dancing girls or Chukries, advertised about the

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beneficial effects and pleasure of smoking bidis. The man who played the harmonium hung from his neck was the leader of the troupe. When a dancing girl offered a bidi to a village bumpkin with a lustful gesture, he felt gratified. Then Chandra started a betelnut shop. The shop was running well but he gave up the business and disappeared from Madhupur. He reappeared in Madhupur as a tinker after a couple of years. I don't know how and where he acquired the skill. Then he became a disciple of a sadhu who was passing through Madhupur. Chandra left Madhupur with the sadhu. After a long time he re-surfaced in Madhupur. By that time he himself was a sadhu with matted hair and a bushy beard. The last time I saw him, he'd settled under a banyan tree by the side of river Gadadhar on the outskirts of Madhupur. People referred to the place as Chandrababa's ashram. People flocked to the place to receive the blessings of Chandrababa. A nice and peaceful end of a restless man.

The banyan tree reminds me of another sadhu who used to come to Madhupur on earlier occasions and take shelter under the same banyan tree. He was a completely different type of sadhu. Clean shaven and no matted hair. He was dressed like an ordinary man of that time. I wonder how he happened to be in Madhupur and found that particular banyan tree. The people in the neighbourhood of the tree constructed a temporary shed for him.

All that the sadhu or Sadhubaba as we called him, possessed was a small harmonium. At night a fire was kept burning under the bunyan tree. Connoisseurs of classical music like Uncle Narayan and Loknath Thakur, went to the place to listen to the music sung by Sadhubaba. Loknath Thakur even carried a pair of dugitabla from his house. Thakur was an expert tabla player. He accompanied Sadhubaba on the tabla. The music became more lively. The session would continue till midnight.

I heard uncle Narayan speaking highly of Sadhubaba's performance.

"Yesterday he rendered a piece of kheiyal in Iman. He was at his best," commented Uncle Narayan. Then they discussed among themselves about 'udara', 'mudara', 'dhaibat', 'rekhab', 'gandhar' and some other technical aspects of the music. I knew nothing about these.

The comments of Uncle Narayan could not be dismissed lightly. He himself was an accomplished singer of classical music. Sadhubaba usually didn't go to anybody's place. However he liked my father very much and addressed him 'Bhaisahab'. He was fond of me as I was his Bhaisahab's son. He objected vehemently if people called him Sadhubaba.

"What sadhu? I am a vagabond. I hang the harmonium from my neck and move about from place to place. If I like a place and the people of the place, I stop there for a few days. If I stay in any place for any

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length of time I may grow roots in it. I leave the place before that happens."

People approached him for some medicine for a chronic illness or even for an incurable disease. He laughed hilariously.

"What medicine? I'm no doctor. If you're ill, consult a doctor. Why don't you go to a doctor. Go to Kanaibabu. He is a very good doctor. I'd some stomach trouble. He gave me some medicine when he learnt about it. I was all right in no time."

Sadhubaba was a man of great charisma. Whenever he came to Madhupur all the important persons went to meet him. Even Rajabahadur went to meet him under the banyan tree. He was also a connoisseur of classical music.

Men like Sadhubaba are no longer there.

After the premature death of my father, Sadhubaba came to Madhupur once again. When he learnt about the death of my father he left the place immediately, never to return again.

4

Earlier I talked about my neighbour Chandra Seal or Chandrababa as he was known later. This reminds me of Tagar. Another restless character in search of his identity. Possibly it's one of the characteristics of Madhupur. A man gets tired of the monotony of his everyday life. He wants to express himself in a new medium. Otherwise how did the son of a Zamindar start making films instead of doing what the eldest son of a Zamindar was supposed to do? My father was no exception. He started manufacturing bricks. His brick field was the first one in the district. I started writing stories when no one of my ancestors was known to be a writer.

Let me talk about Tagar. I've not come across any other man with such a volatile character. A man of versatile genius too. He could sing folk-songs to the accompaniment of a dotora, a kind of indigenous musical instrument. He was an expert player of the bamboo flute. He could also make beautiful terracotta figurines. But he could not remain satisfied with the same job for any length of time. In fact he could perform any job quite competently if he liked it. He would be a devoted disciple of any specially qualified man and acquired the skill within a short time. A man named Biswanath came to Madhupur from Rangpur. He had an unusual profession. He was called a 'Bahurupi'. He entertained people by impersonating different types of characters with appropriate dress and suitable makeups. Tagar attached himself to Biswanath and learnt the art from him. Then he himself became a 'Bahurupi'. He started moving around impersonating different

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characters—a lunatic, a nouveau-riche, Siva, a god who was a male as well as a female known as Ardhanariswar and any other interesting figure.

One day a man rushed into our compound at noon and threw himself at the feet of my father. There was a deep wound running along the length of his head and he seemed to be at his wits end.

Father was horrified.

"Who are you? Who's done this to you?"

"Huzur, Bhuban Seal struck me with a machete."

"Bhuban? He is quite a harmless man. Bhuban is not likely to do this. Why did he do it? What did you do?"

"I've done nothing. Just called him a lady."

"Why did you call him a lady?"

"I'm not wrong. Am I? Isn't his intonation like that of a lady? He comes to shave you. You know."

We'd all come out into the veranda and looked at the wounded man with horror and astonishment.

Father tried to manage the situation. He called the servants.

"We'll look into the matter later. Mahendra, bring some linen. Wash and bandage the wound. Maneswar, you go to Kanai doctor and ask him to come here immediately." He was really astonished.

"It's strange! Bhuban? Is he that violent?"

Once again the man stretched himself and touched the feet of my father.

"Huzur, didn't you recognise me? I'm Tagar Bahurupi."

Tagar had guts. He not only came to my father like this but had the temerity to rush to Rajabahadur like this. This time, Dhepera, the valet of the Zamindar, allegedly inflicted the wound on him as he was cutting a banana leaf from the backyard of Dhepera.

Rajabahadur was all admiration for Tagar and gave him twenty rupees on the spot. He also promised to give him the necessary money to purchase his professional accoutrements. But Tagar was not a man to continue in the same profession.

A tinker named Uddhab, used to come to Madhupur from time to time and mended the damaged utensils of the households. People didn't throw away the unserviceable things but kept them for Uddhab to mend. He used to come to our house also. He had all the things he required for his work with him. He had a small bellows and a small bag of charcoal. He dug a hole in the courtyard and fitted the bellows. Pichers, buckets, mangled pots and pans were given to Uddhab.

He made them as good as the newly purchased ones. He used a small hammer. By striking dexterously and lightly he made the uneven surface of

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an aluminium pan quite smooth. He was satisfied with whatever was given to him for his work. While working with undivided attention he suddenly burst into a song. This was just a single line in Bangla. It literally said, "I'm going round the world but can't find the one whom I'm seeking."

Tagar attached himself to Uddhab and got the expertise but did not adopt this as his profession. What I want to say is that Tagar was adept in all kinds of work. A man of versatile talent.

Though Tagar excelled in varied activities his contribution to his family was practically nil. His wife too did not expect anything from him. She was an efficient lady in her own way. She gathered a kind of weed, dried and burnt it and made small flat cakes from the ashes. She sold the cakes to the respectable persons of Madhupur. These cakes were called tikiras. In those days aristocratic persons used to smoke in a special way. The tobacco was converted into a paste mixed with various aromatic ingredients. This was placed in a silim with a hole in its bottom. The slow burning tikiras were placed on the top of the tobacco and the smoke was inhaled through a long flexible pipe. 'Balakhana', 'Bistupuri' were the brand names of this kind of tobacco. A pleasant smell wafted in the neighbourhood.

I feel sorry for Tagar. How pathetic was the end of such a man. He became an imbecile. He squatted like a statue in the veranda of Rambabu's shop. He neither talked to anybody nor gave reply to any question. Suddenly he extended his hand with the palm upwards to a man coming out of the shop.

"Here. Give me four paise."

"What'll you do with four paise?"

"I'll eat a samosa."

If somebody gave him the paise Tagar rushed to the sweetmeat shop of Gajen for the somosa. Again he sat immobile on the veranda. A shiver runs through my spine when I think of Tagar.

5

Psychologists assert that if a man knows the cause of his mental disturbance the disturbance is eliminated. I don't know how correct this assertion is. I know that I have many mental complexes and I think that I know why I have them. In my early years we lived in an atmosphere of abundance. My father was a big contractor in our area. He had a brick field also. There was no other brick field in that region. There was a procession of bullock carts carrying bricks from the brick field to Dhubri. People of Bilashipara

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and Salkocha carried bricks by boats from my father's brick field for their construction works. Father spent as much as he earned. In fact he spent more than what he earned. Our house was like a guest house where food and shelter were free. On the left side of our compound there was a house like a barracks for itinerant guests. Each room of this house was suitably furnished. The house was always full.

One of the regular guests was an Ayurvedic physician. We called him Kaviraj Masai. He was from Barishal, now in Bangladesh. I don't know

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refused. This's the drawback of the promising young men of our district. They've no ambition.' Talks of this nature. Rajabahadur asked me if I had come to see him for a specific purpose. He asked me a few questions. He told the secretary to note the details, write down my name and address and also those of the managing director. Incidentally Rajabahadur informed me that he had met the managing director in Kolkata. He was also a Zamindar of Bengal. After about fifteen days I received a typed copy of the letter which Rajabahadur had written to the managing director. The letter was typed on a sheet bearing the insignia of an elephant with a raised trunk embossed on the top. I wouldn't have got the job without the recommendation of Rajabahadur. I've kept the letter as a memento."

I mentioned this incident to emphasise the point that the Zamindar helped a man willingly if he could. He rendered help to meritorious students who wanted to persue their study outside the state, even outside India. I don't think that I've said anything about Prabhatda. I mean Prabhat Dutta. He was the nephew of the son-in-law of the Zamindar. So he was entitled to get all kinds of help from the Zamindar. He used to work in the match factory of Dhubri.

It's not for nothing that I'm talking of Prabhatda. He came to my place only a few days ago. His son works in Guwahati. Occasionally Prabhatda comes to his son's place and if he comes to Guwahati he is sure to pay a visit to my place also. He is about eighty years old and one of his hands was amputated long ago. He comes to my place riding a city bus. I'm worried about it. The buses are crowded and nobody has any consideration for an old man, even with a handicap.

I was in class X at that time. The news spread in Madhupur like wild fire. One of the hands of Prabhatda had got caught in a machine of the match factory. To extract him his right hand had to be amputated immediately just above the wrist. According to the rumour there was a veritable spout of blood. Prabhat Dutta was in the Dhubri civil hospital waiting for his death. The Zamindar rushed to Dhubri and had a discussion with the European civil surgeon. All possible steps should be taken to save Prabhat. If some medicine was not available locally a man would be sent to Kolkata to get it. What would the civil surgeon suggest? If necessary Prabhat could be taken to Kolkata for proper treatment. Was the journey safe? Everything would be done as advised by the civil surgeon.

I'm trying to draw a picture of the Zamindar of Madhupur to illustrate some of his admirable qualities. I don't say that he didn't have his limitations. But this is a subject to be analysed by a social scientist. The Zamindar was very kind at least to those who were close to him.

I cited the incident to focus on the indomitable spirit of Prabhatda.

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In those days there was no provision for paying compensation to workers for accidents. What were the future prospects of a physically handicapped person? If he was from a well-to-do family he was to depend on the mercy of his relatives and if he belonged to a poor family he had to beg in the streets. Prabhatda could have lived depending on the charity of the Zamindar but what was the use of such a life? A life without any aim, without any dream? Prabhatda refused to accept such a situation.

Just at the precise moment an Anglo-Indian engineer came to Madhupur to install the machinery of the power house of the Zamindar. His right hand was also amputated just below the elbow. He was known in Madhupur as 'Hatkata Sahab'. Prabhatda regained his equanimity when he saw the 'Hatkata Sahab' going about his job quite normally. He attached himself to the 'Hatkata Sahab'. If the Sahab could carry on his work with such aplomb, he too could possibly do so.

Another young man of Madhupur also became a fan of the 'Hatkata Sahab'. His name was possibly Sukumar. When the engineer returned to Kolkata he took both Prabhat Dutta and Sukumar with him. After several years Prabhatda returned to Madhupur. He had an artificial limb but it was just for show. No useful purpose was served by it.

The situation of Madhupur was no longer the same. After the World War, trucks and jeeps were available at a very low price. The number of vehicles increased all of a sudden. There was considerable improvement of road communication. Formerly if a man wanted to go to Salkocha from Madhupur by car, the car had to be ferried across three rivers by 'Marboats'. A Marboat was a special kind of ferry boat formed by joining two boats by a platform. It was a very clumsy and time-consuming affair. During the war, bridges were constructed over the rivers. Buses and trucks could run without obstruction. But there was a dearth of good garages. It was also difficult to find an efficient mechanic.

After his return from Kolkata, Prabhat Dutta established a garage in Madhupur. If there was some difficult job, he did it himself. While working he disconnected the artificial limb and put it aside. Then he pressed the part of the machine against the body of the vehicle by his stump and managed the work expertly by handling the tool with his left hand. It was astonishing to see him managing the work with such precision.

Once I asked Prabhatda, "Why did you return to Madhupur? I'm told that you worked as a foreman of a reputed foreign company. You got many facilities."

"You're right," he said "I earned much more than what I earn here."

"So, why did you come back?"

"Madhupur started to pull me. There's something in Madhupur. I can't define it exactly."

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Possibly there is, or, there was. I don't know how it's today. Now I go to Madhupur only for a few days. I come back before that something of Madhupur is revealed to me again if, of course, it's still there.

I may be accused of having my eyes fixed at the past. This obscures my vision of the future. But what can I do? My memory wafts back to the past. As I'm growing older the pull of Madhupur is growing stronger. No use regretting now. I should not have left Madhupur in the first place. What have I gained by staying in the city? Then why don't I go back to Madhupur? There's no difficulty. My ancestral home is still there and my brothers'll be glad to welcome me. But it's no longer possible to go back. The thread is torn. You can't join the torn ends. I'm eager to meet every one from Madhupur but I feel embarrassed when I meet one. We find no common subject to talk about. We're in different levels. Neither can I reach him nor can he reach me. We speak in different languages too. I can't even find the loose ends of the severed link. We remain separated. A famous writer has written correctly : "You cannot return home again."

Yes, we can't return home again. Suddenly I see in my mind's eye a picture of Madhupur of bygone days. There's no logic why I see a particular scene or the activities of a particular person or some particular persons. It's not that the people I see were very close to me. Random scenes.

Suddenly I saw Kebal Ray of Madhupur. He was not an important man of Madhupur. He was one of the many persons belonging to the household staff of the Zamindar. Why Kebal Ray? He was allergic to being addressed as 'mama' (a maternal uncle). He was furious if somebody addressed him as 'mama'. Naturaly he couldn't live in peace. If somebody shouted, "Kebal mama", from some direction he rushed in that direction but somebody else addressed him 'mama' from the opposite direction. I didn't understand why he was so allergic to the term 'mama'. Otherwise he was quite normal. He was known to be a reliable and efficient worker. He didn't seem to be a lunatic. I had no peace in my mind. One day I asked him point blank, "Look here. Why do you get so angry if somebody calls you 'mama'?"

Kebal Ray looked at me uncertainly.

"You too? So you too want to address me as 'mama.' "

"No. Why should I? I address you as dada, Kebalda. Do I not? Can an elder brother be addressed as 'mama'?"

Kebal Ray explained the matter lucidly. According to him, 'Shala' (brother-in-law) and 'Mama' were equally insulting words. "If you're the brother of my wife you're my shala", he explained, "But if you're the brother of my mother you're my mama. What's the difference?"

So there was ample justification for the ire of Kebalmama; I mean Kebal Ray.

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Mohit Misir, too was a bit of an eccentric. Otherwise he was quite sane, but if somebody said 'Radhakrishna' in his hearing, he also became furious. So it was difficult for urchins not to say 'Radhakrishna' in his hearing. It was a spontaneous reaction that the sight of Mohit Misir generated. He was a junior worker in the revenue collection office of my maternal uncle. I got inquisitive and accosted Mohit Misir.

"Why do you become so angry when they say 'Radhakrishna' in your hearing?"

"Why not? They are licentious persons, both of them. If you're to utter the names of gods say Siya Ram."

In the meantime somebody cried out loudly, "Mohit Misir, look for Radhakrishna in your *tiki*. They're there."

Tiki means a tuft of hair much longer than the rest and is considered to be very sacred.

Mohit Misir had a fairly large *tiki*. He kept it tied in a knot. Hearing the words he became very agitated, untied the knot and started to wave it vigorously.

10

It's difficult for me to speak of Madhupur objectively. How can you be objective if you're emotional? Every man of Madhupur was not a nice man. Some were good and some were bad. I think the situation is the same even today. Moreover those whom I knew intimately were related to me in some way. I don't have to shout from the top of the roof if somebody had some weakness. Everybody loved me starting from Rajabahadur down to the beggar on the street.

While talking of beggars I remember Atapjan Pagli. In fact she was not a Pagli or a mad woman. Atapjan used to beg from door to door. She used to come to our house from time to time. The first thing she did was to enquire about the welfare of every one of the family.

As a college student when I came home Atapjan advised me as a well-wisher.

"My boy, you must study very seriously to become an important person. May God bless you."

She raised both her hands towards the sky, closed her eyes and muttered some prayers. She was praying to God to bless me. Atapjan prayed for me not because she expected to get something from me.

I don't know why but today I'm thinking of these unknown and unimportant persons of Madhupur. I feel that they too played some role, each in his or her own way, in shaping my future life and thoughts.

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Possibly I've talked about Baburam earlier. Everybody knew about the event. So there's no harm in recounting it. There was an illicit relationship between Baburam's wife and an employee of the Zamindar. The man was warned repeatedly. He paid no heed to the warnings. When the situation became quite unbearable, Baburam, with the help of some of his cronies killed the man. No one of them was a professional criminal. The work was amateurish and clumsy. All of them were arrested and jailed not for long terms considering the extenuating circumstances. They were released after a few years. Baburam was also released. A look of happiness used to spread on his face to see me when I went to Madhupur. "My boy, When did you come? How're you? How're the children?"

I can go on speaking about so many people of Madhupur starting from a murderer to the most important man.

Only a few persons of bygone years are still alive. The people of the present age don't even recognise me. When I go to Madhupur I feel like a stranger. I've not been able to grow roots in the city and I've uprooted myself from Madhupur. I feel like Trishanku, the mythical king who was stuck midway between Heaven and Earth.

Rajabahadur had cancer of the throat when I was a college student. When I came to Madhupur during the summer vacation and learnt of it, I decided to call on him. I thought that I wouldn't disturb Rajabahadur. I would just enquire about him from his second son and return. His son dragged me to the bed room of Rajabahadur. He could no longer speak but there was no sign of suffering on his face. He'd a smile of welcome on his face when he saw me and he asked me to be seated on the edge of his bed with a gesture of his eyes. There was no question of having a conversation and I didn't have the courage to ask him any question also. He wrote something on a slate with a piece of chalk and the secretary handed over the slate to me. I had a surge of emotion to see what he had written. Neglecting his pain and even overlooking the sure and steady approach of death he had tried to inspire me.

"Madhupur has great hope in you."

Madhupur meant the people of Madhupur.

Rajabahadur is dead. His son also died long ago. I'm on the doorstep of death. At the fag end of my life I beg for the forgiveness of my Bardeuta the elder brother of my father :

"Uncle, please forgive me. I couldn't fulfil your wish."

Translated from Assamese by the Author

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Makon's God

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya

"Oh God, take me away. Take me away." Kneeling before the *thapana*[1] of her god Makon prayed at the crack of dawn.

She has been praying like this from the very day the vermillion point got erased off her forehead. Today also she did the same though she is a bit angry with her god. If her almighty god can not rescue her from these troubles, who else will? People have always rejected her. No one is there to help her with the chores in this lonesome house. There is nobody in the neighbourhood with some sympathy for her so that she too shall live on. There is no land in her name except this plot where her house stands. She goes begging for food door to door and earns a handful of rice. Most part of the day she is at Bapukon Gosain's house where she helps the wife manage her household and gets something in return. Sometimes they pay in cash too. And her life moves on. For the last two years Makon has been a widow.

Makon broke into a sob in the middle of her prayer. Tears streamed down her cheeks, wet the *thapana*, yet she didn't stop crying. Again and again she prayed before her blind god, "Oh God, please take me out of this world. Take me away." But her prayer went in vain interrupted again and again by the image of Bapukon Gosain.

Bapukon Gosain.

Handsome, well-built, fair complexioned and sharp featured Bapukon Gosain. One gets relaxed just having a look at him. His words are like the sweet nectar of the honey bee. The whole world respects this Bapukon Gosain who offers prayers through *nam-prasanga*[2] four times a day at his

1. The place where the idol, holy books and other things related to prayer are kept
2. readings of the holy books

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place. The large courtyard always remains packed with devotees coming from far off to offer him *manani*[3]. Only in monsoon there is a slackening because people have to remain busy in their fields during those days.

But there was not a single person there yesterday. The wife too had been off to her mother's. It was not very far and she was supposed to come back that very day. In the afternoon Makon entered the *dhekighar*[4] shouting for the wife, "*Aai*?...*Aai*[5]?" But instead of the *Aai* it was the *Prabhu*[6] who answered in a sweet voice that melted Makon's heart.

"Who's there? Makon? Come in, do come in."

Having arranged for the Gosain's breakfast early in the morning the wife was off leaving enough time for the man to enjoy unending leisure. Gosain, with his mind free of all worries, was relaxing on a mat, his head on a pillow. Apprehensively Makon entered and saw the bare bodied, sweet faced Bapukon Gosain resting on a mat and smiling flirtatiously at her. Makon felt awkward.

What is this? Good God! Makon could not raise her eyes fixed on the ground and remained still like a tree. She hesitated to ask even a single question.

"Makon, you're like one in the family. And still you're not open to me. Why? Come and sit beside me. Let me talk about your husband. When we were young...." Bapukon Gosain stopped at that.

Makon was about to go when Bapukon Gosain too rose and pleaded, "Just wait a little, Makon. Wait a little."

Makon could do nothing but stop.

"Tell me why have you come? Your *Aai* is not home."

"*Aai* promised me a sackfull of rice."

"Of course, you'll get the rice. Why should you worry when I am there? At his death-bed your husband asked me to look after you."

Makon was not aware of any such thing. The only thing she was aware of at that moment was that this Bapukon Gosain was trying to send some message across. Her heart trembled. But she could not realise why she was staring at the handsome face of Bapukon Gosain, why those signs of lust on the sacred face of the Gosain appeared so appealing to her.

Makon was home after a short while. When she was leaving Bapukon Gosain said he would visit her the next day.

The whole night Makon could not sleep. Dozing off she dreamt of

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3. offerings for the priest in cash or other valuable items.
4. a room inside the house where the rice pounding machine or *dheki* is kept.
5. *Aai* means mother in Assamese. Elderly and respected ladies are often addressed as *aai*.
6. *Prabhu* means the lord or God. It is also used to address a respectable man.

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her husband's burning eyes chasing her like a flame. But she was not inviting those sins herself. It was only Bapukon Gosain who....

Will her god forgive her? No, he won't. Will people forgive her if they come to know? No, they too will not. Will she forgive herself? No, never. But this Bapukon Gosain has magical charms. When he looks at you, smiles at you, you get hypnotised.

That is why Makon prayed before her god in the morning.

"Take me away before this Bapukon Gosain steps in my house, oh God. Don't hand me over to that enchanter Gosain, my Lord."

But nothing much happened in the life of Makon before Bapukon Gosain arrived at her place. Makon again stood still staring at the well-built handsome body of the Gosain. The man gave her an inviting smile and said, "What happened my sweet heart. Standing still?"

The Gosain's words were seeped in precious loveliness and there was dearth of love in this poor Makon's life. She didn't dare open her mouth not to speak of saying something in protest. Like a motionless statue she kept looking at Bapukon Gosain.

Bapukon Gosain got hold of a footstool and sat down. Unable to trail Makon's thoughts, he started slowly, "I can see your house needs repairing."

"Yes, but who'll do it?"

"You can get a hut built in my courtyard itself. You can eat at my place, stay at my place."

"No, *Prabhu* I am thinking of staying at this place till my death. Don't pester this woman anymore."

"That's o.k. It seems you are thinking along the right lines. But you are a woman. How'll you live with nobody by your side?"

"I have my god by my side."

"Yes, yes." Gosain cast an insulting eye over the room where the idol of her god was kept. Gosain's face became sombre when he caught sight of the *thapana*.

"Whose idol is that?"

"*Jalanarayan*[7]."

"Where did you fetch it from?"

"From Dergaon."

"How long is it you've not bathed the idol?"

"It's been two years."

"Why are you keeping it with you?"

"I don't like to stay in an empty house."

"Hu..." Bapukon Gosain measured the pros and cons and continued,

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7. the water-god.

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"Tomorrow I'll come and bathe the idol. You will rot in hell if you keep your god unclean like that."

With this warning Bapukon Gosain left her house. Makon's heart got filled with remorse. Yes, it is true that the god has not been bathed for two years. How'll the god be satisfied with her? How will a god dissatisfied with her answer her prayers?

Makon's head got lowered in reverence for Bapukon Gosain. Oh, the way he cares for her!

Just at dawn Makon heard Bapukon Gosain calling out her name. She was surprised. Why is the Gosain coming to bathe the idol when it's still dark? Probably he thought it is the auspicious hour. How will the sins of two long years get atoned otherwise?

She hastened to answer the door and saw the body of Bapukon Gosain glistening in the dim light of dawn like the smoke from an incense stick. This person has the blood of a god. She kept standing and staring at Bapukon Gosain. Bapukon said softly, "Sweet heart, you are my goddess!"

Makon was caught by surprise. Especially at his use of the words 'sweet heart' and 'goddess'. Unable to understand anything she kept looking at the Gosain.

"You are surprised, aren't you? I had a dream and rushed out."

"What kind of dream?"

"Your *Jalanarayan* has ordered me to get him out of here."

"You are lying."

"No, this is the truth." Bapukon Gosain gave a faint smile.

"I won't let you."

"I know you can not live without your god. If the god leaves the goddess will also leave."

"I won't leave."

"The god will be unhappy if you don't go with him."

Makon's heart sank, "No, he will not. He will not." Thus yelling Makon ran towards the room where the idol of her god was kept.

Bapukon remained shocked for sometime and then followed her. He saw the idol dangling down her neck tied to a *gamusa*[8].

It was day break. Bapukon shouted at her, "Hey, you sinner, what are you up to? Why did you touch that idol without taking a bath?"

"You can not take away my god."

Bapukon was stunned. He noticed it was not the Makon he met the other day. This Makon is totally different from the other one. This is a strange one. It will not be easy to tame this woman.

8. a traditional hand-woven towel of the Assamese.

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Even then Bapukon waited outside for sometime. But Makon did not come out of the prayer room. Seeing it was no use waiting there he walked home.

After four days Bapukon got to know from his wife that Makon had not been eating anything for the last four days. She was just engrossed in her prayer with the *Jalanarayan* dangling down her neck. The only time she came out was to take a bath. She even slept by the idol. He also heard that the other day she fell very sick.

Bapukon did not say a thing. After some time the wife herself set out for Makon's house.

Makon was lying near the *thapana*, almost unconscious. She did not hear the first time the wife called out her name. It was only the second time that she answered, "Is it *Aai*?"

"Yes. What is this you are up to?"

"*Aai*, God has summoned me," Makon said gasping for breath.

"No, no. It is not the time for this little girl to die. No, no. You come with me."

"*Aai*. You go away. Let me die."

The wife tried to feed her but to no use. No one could make her break the fast unto death.

The wife returned and almost reproached the Gosain for not visiting Makon. She will not listen to anyone but Bapukon Gosain—that was the last piece of information the wife could garner him.

"It is of no use me going there."

"You people are really very heartless, do you hear that? If you can not save her, I too will die. Who does she have apart from us?" Muttering these words the wife disappeared.

Bapukon Gosain kept looking at his wife in utter surprise. What will he say to her? It is he who's to be blamed. He came out of the house and walked towards Makon's. Reaching he went straight into the prayer room. It was midday. No one was around. Bapukon Gosain felt Makon's forehead and said is low voice, "Makon, do you hear me?"

Makon opened her fatigued eyes and looked at him.

"What happened?"

"Leave this fast. No one is going to take away your god."

Makon replied with utmost effort, "No, I can no longer live in this world. May God release me from this hell."

Bapukon Gosain looked at the silent and worn out face of Makon and unable to make up his mind as to what to say, he kept silent.

Just at that moment the wife appeared. She was carrying some curd, rice and a few ripe bananas. At the sight of the wife Bapukon Gosain felt

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comfortable. Turning to Makon he said, "Makon, just look at your *Aai*. What she is bringing you."

Makon opened her eyes, saw the wife and continued slowly, "*Aai*, what are these you are bringing. It is better for me to die hungry than live eating food."

The wife entreated, "In the name of God, I say. If you die, I too will die."

But Makon was unyielding. She was offended by Bapukon Gosain. She was offended by the whole world. Finding her helpless, Bapukon Gosain made sexual moves. She can not express it before anyone. Nor can she make a lie out of the truth. Gradually she understood that the motive behind his willingness to take away the idol was to have a hold on her. Once she is grasped, there would be no one to rescue her.

Is it only that? No. How can she go on living without the help of people like Bapukon Gosain. Who'll employ her in pounding rice, who'll she go to and ask for help? Bapukon Gosain was right. The helpless woman would die when there would be no one to give her refuge. After all she was a widow.

Bapukon Gosain has hold over people. They listen to him. What does she have? This is not a society to understand her plight. It is better to die respectfully when there is time today than to lead a shameful life after sacrificing oneself in the burning desire of a Bapukon Gosain.

She does not want to say these things because it will not be easy for people to understand what she says. When both the Gosain and the wife failed against the widow's firm resolve to end her life, Bapukon Gosain took an immediate decision.

Bapukon declared that *shani devta*[9] has cast his evil eyes on Makon and she needs to do *shandi paath*[10] to pacify the god. He also declared that this *shandi paath* will begin at Makon's fast-bed itself.

Finding no other way out the Gosain's wife too gave in to this proposal. *Shandi paath* began that very evening. Single-mindedly, with utmost zeal Bapukon Gosain began reading the text of *shandi*.

The whole night an earthen lamp lay lit inside Makon's prayer room. The wife started dozing off and after some time went to sleep on the mat itself.

But Bapukon Gosain's *shandi paath* continued incessantly. Makon's eyes

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9. *shani* is the god of evil in Hindu mythology.
10. readings of the holy books.

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were fixed at the man. Gosain stopped for a moment and asked sheepishly, "Makon, my goddess. Do you feel better now?"

Makon nodded.

Towards dawn tears rolled down her listless eyes.

Bapukon stopped reading the text and woke the wife up, "Hey, get up. The goddess is satisfied. Let her have some food before she takes a bath."

The wife got up, mixed the rice well with some curd and sugar and put it into Makon's mouth.

Makon was still lost in the *shandi paath.* Anger, sadness, fear everything disappeared from her mind. What remained was the desire to offer the self before the goddess.

She did not realize when she gulped down the food. As the bowl got empty the wife asked, "Will you have some more, *Aai?*" Only then she came to know that her fast unto death has already been broken by Bapukon Gosain's magic.

"No, I don't need more", Makon turned her face aside.

This time she was not sorry. She felt her fast unto death started showing its effect on Bapukon Gosain. Probably some heavenly power is leading him towards the path of good.

In the morning when the wife was gone, Makon looked at Bapukon Gosain and said, *"Prabhu,* may the goddess give you wisdom."

Bapukon Gosain did not take offence at her words. Instead he released a sigh and said, "You'll be alright Makon, I swear. I had some wrong intentions earlier, but now I left all that. If I dissatisfy you, the goddess will be dissatisfied with me. From now on you will be my companion in the way to God."

This time Makon rose. *"Prabhu,* it does not behove of great people like you to speak highly of us insects. You are the descendents of God."

Bapukon heaved a sigh, got up and was off.

Makon released a deep breath of relief and hugged the *Jalanarayan* dangling down her neck. Perhaps she too became firmer in her belief that there was no one in this world to help her except her god.

Translated from Assamese by Syeda Semim Zahan

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Heard, But Never Seen

Meera Kant

Innumerable are the plays based on the events and anecdotes of the distinguished personality of Sanskrit literature, Kalidasa, but one wonders why have the playhouse curtains remain drawn on his demise. Meera Kant's play *Shrooyate Na Tu Dristryate/Suna Hua Andekha* or "Heard But Never Seen" seeks to raise the curtain on this episode. The unfortunate decease of Kalidasa deprived Sanskrit literature of two contemporary poets: one Kalidasa of *Raghuvamsham* and the other Kumaradasa of *Jaanakiharanam*.

According to the word doing the rounds then, the first line of the shloka *Shrooyate Na Tu Drishyate* certainly belonged to Kumaradasa but the last line will ever be known as the last literary line of the Poet Laureate Kalidasa. This affair unfolding the tragic end of Kalidasa came about not in Aryavarta but in Sinhaladweep (Sri Lanka). A specific *bhikshu-vihaara* of Sri Lanka also opines that the eternal resting place of Kalidasa lies in the southern part of Sri Lanka at a place called Maatar near the confluence of the river Kirindi and the ocean. The last words of Kalidasa were also addressed to the sovereign, Kumaradasa.

According to the realistic backdrop of this play, Poet Kumaradasa was the ruler of Sinhaladweep. Inspired by Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsham* he penned *Jaanakiharanam* that was praised by Kalidasa unequivocally. Kalidasa then reached to meet his brother-in-verse. A sensitive and imaginative individual, he wanted to appreciate and experience the life and mores of the new realm before meeting its monarch. This he did, dressed up as a commoner. As it happened, one night he ventured into the dwelling of a courtesan, Kamini, who happened to be Kumaradasa's beloved. On a wall, there hung a part of a shloka by Kumaradasa. A huge reward had been announced for anybody completing this shloka. The quirk in this condition was that if Kamini completed this shloka Kumaradasa would wed her.

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Kalidasa completed the shloka for Kamini, which, unfortunately, he bartered for his doom—Kamini poisoned him. When she came to know that he was Kalidasa, the Poet Laureate of Aryavarta, she committed suicide. Unable to bear the tragic end of his revered brother-in-verse in his own kingdom, Kumaradasa too took his own life. Thus came about the departure of two of the greatest poets at one go—in the same fire.

Without any disrespect, whatsoever, to the Poet Laureate, the play also attempts to review this episode, centuries later, from the perspective of feminist discourse. In the light of human rights, it is also useful to dwell upon the flip side of this episode—the emotional state of Kamini, because the crimes committed by women are often a mere manifestation of the crimes committed upon them. The idea is not to put a halo of smugness or self-esteem around the image of woman as a murderess. The point is to glance into the blemished world of the lowly and inconsequential in all their triviality. The endeavour of the play is also to illuminate this darkness on the stage.

Another feature of feministic discourse, which fleets through the play, is the relationship between Kalidasa and his wife Vidyottama. After being honoured by the rank of Poet Laureate, Kalidasa conferred on his wife the status of a teacher, *Guru,* and refused to honour her conjugal rights. The question arises, to what extent can unilateral decisions on connubial issues be justified? Vidyottama was deceived twice in her life due to her superior intelligence: the first when she was married to an idiot Kalidasa and the next when her husband treated her as a teacher and denied her nuptial rights. Why is it that a woman can be either brains or body? The delicate body or the formless divinity! Why can't the society perceive her in her entirety?

The basis of four characters — Kalidasa, Kumaradasa, Kamini, and Vidyottama — is the folklore, while the other characters, including Rajamma, are imaginary. Rajamma is perhaps one of the main characters of this play that is possibly less individualistic, representing the sum-total of the socio-human inconsistencies.

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Characters

Kamini	:	An affluent young courtesan in Sinhaladweep, mistress of Kumardasa, the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep.
Rajamma	:	A middle aged courtesan, Kamini's guardian. Experience and age reflects in her demeanour.
Kumardasa	:	Sovereign of Sinhaladweep, author of the famous Sanskrit poetic composition *Janakiharanam.*
Kalidasa	:	The celebrated bard and playwright of Aryavarta. One of the nine jewles of Chandragupta Vikramaditya's court. In the declining years of his life.
Vidyottama	:	Kalidasa's wife and the scholarly daughter of the king of Kashi.
Devdutta	:	Kalidasa's young assistant.
Pratapan	:	Commander of the Sinhalese army.
Mukundan	:	An affluent trader of Sinhaladweep.
Somasundaram	:	A poet of Sinhaladweep.
Saroja	:	Kamini's maid.
Soldier-1		
Soldier-2		
Doorkeeper		

Time and Place

The ambience of the fifth-sixth century Sinhaladweep (Sri Lanka) with a touch of Ujjaini of the same age.

Scene-I

(The inner chamber in the house of the Sinhaladweep courtesan, Kamini. The decor of the room is a blend of affluence and pomp. Kamini is getting ready in a private chamber adjoining this room. Rajamma enters the stage i.e., the inner chamber. She is holding a platter of jewellery in her hands. Very carefully, she places the tray on the dressing stool placed to a side in the room. As she places the tray, she catches herself in the mirror in front. Intently surveys her grey hair and runs her hand through them, lost in her thoughts. Then she slowly turns her head towards the window, walks up to it to peep outside.)

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Rajamma : The night here's falling, but Kamini just can't get over with her make-up! The nobles will be here any moment. *(Returns to the tray on the stool. Caresses the jewellery on the tray. Picks up an ornament and holds it high.)* But does she c...a...r...e! She will have just one visitor tonight, who comes with an appointment... Kumardasa, the ruler of Sinhaladweep! *(Replaces the ornament on the tray. Calling towards the private chamber)* Kamini... hurry up, child... it's twilight already...no time for daydreaming.

Kamini : *(From backstage, cheerfully)* Coming, Rajamma...

Rajamma : Are we adorning ourself in our chamber all day?

(Kamini enters, arranging her dress, lost in herself)

Kamini : *(Dreamily, partly addressing Rajamma and partly herself)* God knows what kind of silk from Kanchi has your Sinhaladweep royal given me. It simply doesn't stay.

(Rajamma surveys her appreciatively from head to toe)

Rajamma : When the mind isn't steady, how can other things be, child!

(Rajamma walks up to Kamini and helps her with her dress, adjusting the shoulder piece. Then she picks up a large necklace from the plate, and moves towards Kamini.) Here, put this on... it will steady the *anchal. (Kamini, smiling, retreats two steps)* What happened?

Kamini : *(Kamini, attempts to hide her joy and bashfulness. In an affected manner.)* Not these lifeless ornaments tonight... just flowers... I shall adorn myself exclusively with flowers.

Rajamma : *(Understanding her import)* Adorn herself with flowers, indeed!

Kamini : Amma, did Saroja bring *kanakambara* flowers for my hair?

(Moving towards the dressing-stool) Not this dead weight tonight...

Rajamma : So, you're meeting Kumardasa tonight, as his Kalidasa's Shakuntala... *(Looking up at the sky with folded hands)* May both the master of my soul and Kumardasa's *Mahashiva* be his protectors... With you as his poet-friend's heroine, I wonder if he can be himself for long!

Kamini : *(Bashfully, throws her arms around Rajamma's neck)* Amma!

Rajamma : *(Stroking Kamini's hair gently)* Come, let me put some *alta* on your feet. *(Kamini sits on a stool. Rajamma calls out)* Saroja... Saroja... *(Saroja enters)*

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Saroja : Orders for me?

Rajamma : *(Indicating the tray of ornaments)* Take that away. The Sovereign's beloved will honour flowers tonight... Get us flower braids. *(Saroja leaves with the tray. Rajamma readies herself to apply alta on Kamini's feet.)* Here child, your wish has been fulfilled, but never forget that the lives of women like us are never fulfilled with just one goal... never have been. We are the highways that never reach any door. This is our chamber... and our guest-rooms, too. My words might hurt you... but who puts money on a king's or a mendicant's friendship!

Kamini : *(Jocularly, to relieve the solemnity of the atmosphere)* You often say this... adding cats to the list of kings and mendicants. Their friendship's... Have I heard this before! You pack even cats with kings and mendicants!

Rajamma : *(Cutting her short, in a serious tone)* But has that made any difference to you? *(Saroja enters with flowers on a tray)* Keep them here, near me.

Kamini : Rajamma, tell her I shall see no other guest tonight.

Rajamma : *(Restraining her annoyance, to Saroja in an indifferent tone)* Inform the doorman.

Saroja : As you say. *(Saroja exits smiling, casting a furtive glance at Kamini)*

Rajamma : I've given in to all your wishes even as a child ... got used to it. But this order is improper. It's an insult to our profession... One shouldn't treat one's livelihood with such contempt.

Kamini : Livelihood it is, but soon won't be.

Rajamma : *(Sarcastically)* O! the Queen of Sinhaladweep, eh?

Kamini : *(A glow of confidence in her eyes)* Just wait and see!

Rajamma : *(Laughs)* Is this your presumption, or his assurance? *(After a while)* Neither... a dream... just a daydream!

Kamini : *(A little indignantly)* Haven't you ever?

Rajamma : I did... not as ambitious though. And what! Where am I now? Just helping you with your make-up...in this cat house! *(Puts the flower-necklace around Kamini's neck and then ties the braids around her wrists.)*

Kamini : *(Humbly)You* feel bad, don't you?

Rajamma : *(Affectionately)* What do I have in life to look forward to, save you! Who will be more pleased than me to see you in the palace!
(Adorns Kamini's hair with flowers)

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Kamini : Then why such bitterness? Why these thorns with the flowers?

Rajamma : I have lived my life with these thorns... I'm aware that our King has a tender heart... a poet's heart really. Different from others. *(Pauses)* But I know... I'm aware, as well... the world across the threshold isn't a mere foot away ... They are two separate worlds... far apart... Never seen them meet. Women like us presume that they will not be beaten like the others. And that's the irony of it... each one of them believes that her admirer is not like the others... but that distance across the threshold still remains.

Kamini : So, you at least agree that he is different from others. But look here a moment. *(Cocking her head jauntily)* Do you see nothing uncommon here?

Rajamma : *(Regards Kamini for a long moment)* Then why tarry? He'll be in soon... why not put this uncommon to test! *(Rajamma exits. Kamini turns towards the mirror to admire herself in the same attitude)*

Kamini : *(Feels her own cheeks, eyes, and lips, savouring the touch)* This glowing figure... these eyes... these full lips... and their powers of satiation... this physical charm to drown one in unfathomable pleasure. *(Withdraws from the mirror)* Many an enchantress might well have this wealth of physical charm... but there's something more... *(Overwhelmed)* More attractive... the heart... my heart...very personal. My own uniqueness! And this is what makes the Sovereign spurn every gem in the entire Sinhaladweep... this serendip drawn towards *(Indicating herself)* this jewel... What if I'm a courtesan!
(Saroja enters)

Saroja : The Sovereign of Sinhaladweep has arrived. He waits in the guest-room.

Kamini : *(Startled)* You arrange for the drinks. I'll join him shortly. *(Saroja leaves. Kamini's self-admiring tone betrays a tinge of perturbation)* Rajamma has challenged me to test the power of my beauty... but before that charming poet, whither stays reason?

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Scene - II

(Kamini's guest-room. On a wall hangs a line in Sanskrit in golden letters. A look at the words suggests that the composition is incomplete. In the room, reclining on the bed is Kumardasa, the sovereign of Sinhaladweep. He is drinking from the goblet in his hand. At intervals, he looks towards the door with a restless and anxious look. Kamini enters with slow, inebriated gait. Kumardasa immediately places the goblet on the stool nearby and stares at her unblinkingly.)

Kumardasa : One has to wait for spring, hasn't one?

Kamini : *(In the manner of a capricious mistress)* Who knows who waits! This Shakuntala is destined to wait, King Dushyanta!

Kumardasa : *(Overjoyed, to himself)* What coincidence! Only today did we receive tidings that our poet-friend Kalidasa has left Kanyakumari for Sinhaladweep a few days back... Probably won't take long to arrive... and here's my Kamini– dressed as Shakuntala!

Kamini : Where're you, my lord?

Kumardasa : *(Holding Kamini's arm, trying to pull her closer)* Is it your evergreen charm that pulls me hither?

Kamini : *(Freeing her arm, smiling)* And now nary can you get this Shakuntala before the wedding knot!

Kumardasa : *(Jocularly)* Oops! Then must stay prepared for *Durvasa's* curse as well.

(Laughs aloud. Kamini joins him in his laughter. Then, she sits on the bed)

Kamini : The wait has wilted even these flowers, Your Majesty.

Kumardasa : *(With astonishment)* Majesty! *(With tenderness)* Just poet Kumardasa for you. The majesty is only for the others...

(Kumardasa draws closer to Kamini, touching her passionately)

These blossoms can never wilt...

Kamini : *(Leaves the bed and stands at some distance)* This spring in pieces isn't fragrance any more... its sweet smell is long lost...I want to give all to get all.

Kumardasa : Why this distrust on my unflinching love today?

Kamini : There has to be a basis for trust, Kumardasa...a view to see. *(In a hurt tone)* It takes an aeon to glimpse even a shadow of one's desire. In your palace I shall at least be close to you.

Kumardasa : The sky is the most appropriate place for the sun... As it comes closer, it sets into the ocean.

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Kamini : *(Showing ostentatious displeasure)* You can say that! You're a poet... You can use similies and cleverly wriggle away!

Kumardasa : It's you who inspire my poetry. My imagination... *(Suddenly, reminded of something, looks at the composition on the wall.)* But... what about my composition here? This is the only one where my imagination ditched me midway. *(Intones the words on the wall) Kamale kamalotpattih shruyate na tu drishyate. (Lost in thought)* Lotus begets lotus; heard but never seen. *(After a while)* Will this composition remain incomplete forever?

Kamini : As yet yes, like our love! *(Kumardasa considers Kamini for a while. Suddenly, she asks)* Will you tell me something? Honestly, haven't you left this incomplete on purpose?

Kumardasa : *(Smiling)* Complete it, then!

Kamini : Frisky, aren't you?

Kumardasa : *(Seriously)* No... This Kamini's appeal lies in not just her physical charm... but her poetic soul as well. Don't I know that you love the poet, Kumardasa, than the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep? Who else would have read my compositions with greater involvement than you!

Kamini : *(With tenderness)* Every letter of those compositions has sunk into my consciousness... In my hours of solitude, I read the compositions of Kalidasa over and over again... Kalidasa, the great poet of Aryavarta, your idol.

Kumardasa : That's it then! Now you alone shall complete this line. Today, the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep...your...and only your Kumardasa... gives you his solemn word of honour that as soon as this composition is completed, I shall marry you.

Kamini : *(Overwhelmed by her emotion)* Kumardasa... Will this really happen?

Kumardasa : *(Coming closer)* Yes Kamini, it will. You will complete this thought... fill it with the hues of your imagination... and this marriage shall be solemnised.

Kamini : Kumar! *(The twain move closer to each other)*

Kumardasa : *(Encircling her in his arms)* Now, let's not rake up issue on *Kanva* and *Durvasa*... the bower awaits us... We shall also give them due thought some other time... *(The duo leave for the inner chamber in merry laughter.)*

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Scene - III

(Dusk has fallen. Ordinarily dressed Kamini sits in the guest room staring at the inscription on the plaque hanging on the wall. She repeats the written line to herself. Rajamma enters. She is amazed and angry at seeing her.)

Rajamma : What do you mean sitting in the guest room without any adornment at this hour? (*Kamini casts a melancholic glance at Rajamma by way of response.*) Time for the guests to arrive... (*Kamini looks away but does not speak.*) At least change the way you look...now that you have no control over your thoughts! (*Kamini takes another look at the inscription on the wall.*) What's there on the wall to gaze at? (*After glancing at the wall*) Oh! Now I know...your Kumardasa's composition! His unfinished composition! So, now onwards when Kumardasa will not be around, you will spend all your time gazing at these words?

Kamini : (*In an earnest tone*) Amma, these words are now my last hope... Should I succeed in completing this line...

Rajamma : What then?

Kamini : You will see me where you wish to see me.

Rajamma : (*In a tender voice*) Will you explain yourself?

Kamini : It's true... last night Kumardasa gave me his word, Amma... He says he will marry me when I complete his composition.

Rajamma : But this was put on the wall with a specific purpose, I suppose...

Kamini : I'm aware this is intended to be knotty. Any citizen completing this merits Royal honour... But for me the royal orders have been revised, to which His Majesty and I are the only witnesses.

Rajamma : (*Sharply*) I've come across so many of such nightly promises. They get washed away at the crack of dawn... like night clothes... For now, think of this evening, tonight... rise, adorn yourself... (*Rajamma turns to leave. Turns back as she reaches the door. Kamini continues to sit unmoved*) It's wise to learn from others' experience. Adorn yourself, child.

(Rajamma exits. Kamini gets up unwillingly. Looks at the door through which Rajamma has just left, then walks inside with slow, reluctant steps.)

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Scene - IV

(Kamini's guest room. An atmosphere of festive joy and recreation. The free, unfettered banter of the male dominion is under way. Liquor pots and goblets are neatly arranged on small stools. Pratapan and Mukundan are seen sitting in the room. Saroja is busy filling the goblets.)

Mukundan : *(To Saroja)* Will it be just drinks this evening? You keep filling the cups.

Pratapan : Mukundan, it looks as if that Kamini has given special instructions to Saroja tonight. *(To Saroja)* Has she handed over her charge for tonight to you?

Mukundan : *(Taking a sip from his drink)* That's no problem! I'm a trader... and deal in money transactions... I can take care of my profits. Takes no time for me to fix the worth.

Pratapan : *(Rising to his feet)* Well, this commander of the army has information on affairs across the border... and this is rather close. *(Holds Saroja's hand as he speaks. Saroja's face shows no emotion)*

Saroja : *(With a wooden face)* My mistress will see you gentlemen shortly.

Pratapan : *(Lets go of her hand, laughing aloud)* Notice that, merchant Mukundan!... Kamini's tutelage!

Mukundan : Commander Pratapan! Didn't I tell you that only we know the art of acquiring things for a price?
(Just then, poet Somsundaram enters. Saroja greets him and leaves to get him a drink.)

Somsundaram : Mukundan, a merchant you'll remain...What's so great about paying to gain? Look at me. A well-chosen word and the bird's yours.

Mukundan : *(Irritated, indicating the plaque on the wall)* Now that you're so clever with words, why not shoot one here as well. Who knows you might end up with two birds instead of one!

Pratapan : *(With mild sarcasm)* Know the worth of this priceless gem of Sinhaladweep, our pearl-island, merchant Mukundan. Welcome the poet Somsundaram.... *(To Somsundaram)* Please take a seat.

Somsundaram : Thank you, Commander Pratapan... I can defend myself. I've devoted all my life to literary pursuits. These riddles can hardly be called poetry.

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Mukundan : *(Picks up a bunch of grapes lying close at hand, looking at it)* The grapes are sour.

Somsundaram : *(Vexed)* What do you mean, merchant Mukundan? You think I cannot complete this? But wealth is not my aim in life.

Mukundan : *(Sarcastically)* We're friends of the eventide... and spend our evenings together... complete it for our sake, if not your own.

Somsundaram : For you?

Mukundan : *(Contemptuously)* You shoot your arrow. *(Indicating his lap)* Let the bird fall here! You claim the fame, leave the wealth to us!

Pratapan : How clever! The poet completes the composition and the merchant walks away with the bounty!

Mukundan : But someone will have to complete it after all... how long it has been hanging here on this wall... *(Kamini enters. Inspite of her make-up, adornment and jewels, her face looks lustreless. She has heard the last remark. Saroja follows her, carrying liquor on a tray.)*

Kamini : It will be completed before long now. *(Startled, the three men turn towards Kamini. The army commander stands up in her honour.)*

Pratapan : Welcome Kamini, the exquisite beauty of Sinhaladweep!

Mukundan : *(Pulls out a purse from his pocket and presents it with a flourish)* How can one welcome such exquisite beauty without offering any presents!

(Kamini bows to thank him formally and moves ahead, while the merchant is left gazing at the purse in his hand. Then he places the purse on the tray being carried by Saroja, who follows Kamini.)

Pratapan : *(To Somsundaram)* Why should you be left out? You must have been alone last evening ... Kamini had refused to see anyone... recite to us, if you have been able to compose something.

Somsundaram : *(Sarcastically, with a furtive glance at Kamini)* No dearth of poems to present... but what can an ordinary poet like me offer to someone who is presented with verses by the great bard himself.

Kamini : *(Pretending not to have perceived the sarcasm)* First, my apologies for the last evening.

Mukundan : *(As if testing her)* Probably your indisposition...

Somsundaram : *(Sarcastically)* Or your state of mind?

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Pratapan : Why not both?

Kamini : *(Evasively)* It's the weather.

Pratapan : *(Bowing)* A drink for you?

Somsundaram : *(Concealing the bitterness within)* You must have rested last evening... Did you read any poetry?

Kamini : *(Reads through the sarcasm, but speaks with detachment)* One gets to read only by virtue of one's good deeds in the past, great poet... I just rested myself. I'm inclined to do the same tonight.

Mukundan : *(Digs his hand into his pocket, then pulls it out, empty)* So, I must return disappointed even tonight...

Kamini : No, no... please rest here... I've ordered some new drinks from Aryavarta... I'll bid Saroja present them in your service.

Pratapan : No thanks, fair one... please rest yourself... the evening ends here... I seek leave now. *(Pratapan departs)*

Mukundan : I must leave as well. *(Casting a glance at the poet)* You can utilize the solitude to complete this line.

Somsundaram : *(Angrily)* Challenging me? I need not stay here for that purpose. I'll prove that I can complete it without staying back. *(Leaves in a huff even before Mukundan can)*

Kamini : *(To herself)* None but I shall complete this composition. *(Seeing Kamini lost in self-thought, Mukundan draws closer to her, trying to gauge her)*

Mukundan : So, do I have your leave?
(Kamini is startled at first, then joins her hands in a humble farewell. Mukundan leaves, smiling shyly. Kamini glances back at the composition on the wall, and is lost in herself.)

Scene - V

(The street outside Kamini's house. It is late in the night, darkness all over. The light from Kamini's house falls on the street outside. Kalidasa and Devdutta are engaged in a conversation in the street.)

Kalidasa : We part ways here, dear Devdutta.

Devdutta : Have I offended you in any way O poet laureate?

Kalidasa : *(Laughs)* What makes you think so? The journey from Aryavarta to Sinhaladweep has been a long one... Ujjaini

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to Kanyakumari, and then the onward journey to this island of pearls has been possible for this old Kalidasa just because of you.

Devdutta : That's your generosity, master. Otherwise, this humble disciple of yours...

Kalidasa : *(Feigning anger)* So disciple... obey my orders. I wish to explore this city incognito. I desire to get the feel of the culture here like a wanderer.

Devdutta : *(With folded hands)* Forgive me, master... So far I have carried out all your commands. You did not wish to be recognised by any royal personage. And for just this reason we dressed ourselves like ordinary folk before setting out on our difficult journey from Kanyakumari. We reached here concealing our identity lest we be recognised. But now I can't leave you alone in this bewitching city of *yakshas* and snakes.

Kalidasa : *(Laughs) Yakshas!* You think you can frighten *Meghdutam's* Kalidasa by mentioning *yakshas! (Jocularly)* Good that you reminded me of *yakshas*... We shall select *yakshini* for you here.

Devdutta : *(In a serious tone)* The Sovereign of Malwa has sent me along as an escort to look after your well being and comforts.

Kalidasa : That's why I say... leave me alone.

Devdutta : And your orders?

Kalidasa : Listen, convey my message to the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep, poet Kumardasa, that having accepted his invitation, Kalidasa has arrived in his city. Soon I shall meet that peerless poet. Ask him not to try to find me. I shall find my way.

Devdutta : But in this darkness...?

Kalidasa : Fool! You call light darkness! *(Smiles)* The light from that house shows that it is prepared to receive guests with honour even at this hour. *(In a serious tone)* I shall rest here tonight. You take the boxes in the carriage with you. This bundle will be my only luggage.

Devdutta : *(Astonished)* Bundle!

Kalidasa : Yes, it contains stationery, a few books...and a few other articles of use. Hand that bag over to me and leave. I hope you have the king's seal safe with

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you. That seal will facilitate your access to the royal assembly.

Devdutta : *(With folded hands)* As you say, master. *(Devdutta leaves reluctantly)*

Scene - VI

(Kamini, reclining on the bed in her guest room, is gazing at the unfinished composition on the wall in a disoriented manner. Saroja enters.)

Saroja : Excuse me... but an ordinarily dressed person at the door desires to meet you.

Kamini : Ordinarily dressed! Is it some mendicant? Ask him to come tomorrow. *{Redirects her gaze towards the unfinished composition)*

Saroja : Not a mendicant, mistress; he's a foreigner... he's insistent.

(Kamini gets up)

Kamini : What does he want? All right, let him in. *(Saroja leaves. Kamini looks exasperated)* The whole world gets to know when one wishes to have some solitude... someone or the other always intrudes. *(Kalidasa, bundle in hand, enters with Saroja)*

Kalidasa : I'm unfamiliar with the culture of this place... and know not how to greet a beauty such as this.

Kamini : *(Rising)* Whatever the country or culture... the elderly are always greeted with respect. *(With joined hands)* Will you kindly introduce yourself?

Kalidasa : *(Puts his bundle down)* I'm a foreigner... in search of shelter to pass the night.

Kamini : You're mistaken. This is not a guest house. If you so desire, I can arrange to have you taken there. Anyway, what's your purpose of visiting this country?

Kalidasa : Purpose! The land of Kumardasa, the composer of *Janakiharanam*... its natural splendour... I've come to see the glory of the rising and setting sun... what greater reason can I have for my visit?

Kamini : Will do... Kumardasa's admirer shall certainly find a room to stay in this house... Saroja, he's our guest... show him to the retiring room.

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Kalidasa : Sinhaladweep is by no means less hospitable to foreign visitors! Thank you, lady! I'm much beholden to you.

Saroja : *(Coming forward)* This way, please, sir... *(Saroja leaves and Kalidasa follows her. His bundle is left behind. Kamini tries to write something on the bhojpatras. Kalidasa walks towards the retiring room at the end of the stage, then suddenly turns back. Seeing him return, Saroja too stops.)*

Kalidasa : *(With great hesitation)* These humble belongings of a poor man like me do not add to the grandeur of this room... excuse me, lady ... *(As he makes towards his bundle to pick it up, he observes Kamini gazing unblinkingly at the composition on the wall. He traces her gaze to the gold studded inscription on the wall. Kamini, bhojpatra and pen in hand, is engrossed in the inscription on the wall.)* The good lady has a literary disposition. Writing at the midnight hour!

Kamini : *(Dispiritedly, as if to herself)* I'm not so fortunate. Wouldn't have I completed this composition otherwise!

Kalisdasa : *(Reads aloud the line on the wall with pauses) Kamale kamalotpattih shruyate na tu drishyate. (Tries to comprehend the meaning)* This means... Lotus begets lotus; heard but never seen.

Kamini : *(Somewhat impressed by his diction and ability to comprehend)* Why do you stand? Please take a seat! *(To Saroja)* Carry his belongings to the retiring room. *(Kalidasa sits. Saroja leaves with his bundle)* Shall I get a drink for you?

Kalidasa : Whose line is it... and why is it incomplete?

Kamini : Why shouldn't it... it's my unaccomplished fate after all!

Kalidasa : Please elucidate further, if you don't mind.

Kamini : Whoever you may be, you seem to be a cultured litterateur... Don't know why I'm sharing this with you. Anyway, you're a foreigner.

Kalidasa : Feel free to express yourself. This is literature... transcending the meanness and afflictions of life...

Kamini : *(Indulgently)* This line is by none other than Kumardasa himself, whose country you've come to explore.

Kalidasa : *(Astonished)* By Kumardasa!

Kamini : Yes! By Kumardasa, the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep... No one has succeeded in completing this unfinished composition. The fulfillment of my incomplete life hinges on its completion.

Kalidasa : *(Soliloquising)* Amazing... greatly astonishing... to find life and literature so inseparably intertwined even here!

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Kamini : *(Swayed by her emotion)* A humble grain of sand on the shore aspires to be a part of the brilliance of the sun.

Kalidasa : The sun I can understand... the rule, the ruler... the sovereign himself? *(Kamini nods, Kalidasa looks at her with an admiring gaze)* But, the grain of sand? This personality is by no means sand...

Kamini : My life is worth even less... I'm a courtesan.

Kalidasa : That much I have discerned ... but what's the problem?

Kamini : My desire... the desire that constantly impels me to become Kumardasa's life partner.

Kalidasa : *(A little jocularly)* Hence the poetic exercise to tie the nuptial knot!

Kamini : Yes, he has pledged... the day I complete this composition... he'll marry me.

(Kalidasa gets up and walks a few steps forward on the stage.)

Kalidasa : *(Soliloquising)* The same pledge... same challenge...the same trial by fire...another Kalidasa... another Vidyottama...only the roles have been reversed... some day I had felt equally helpless... once I too had found myself equally vulnerable... just because I had failed to measure up to someone's expectations of knowledge. What contempt and humiliation this Kalidasa was made to suffer at the hands of Vidyottama that day!

Kamini : *(Dejected by Kalidasa's silence)* But you'd come here to rest for the night... I got you embroiled in these unnecessary matters! Perhaps I'm destined to be so...

Kalidasa : *(With pride)* Even the movement of the stars can be altered... *(Controlling himself, with feigned modesty)* I too have been a humble poet at your age. In my village, I used to smear the dust from the feet of a poet on my forehead... If you like, I can try to complete this...

Kamini : Even the great scholars of Sinhaladweep have not been able to complete this...besides, I've been given the responsibility of completing this myself... this is a test I must pass.

Kalidasa : *(Somewhat reminiscently)* These are very distant matters... *(Observes Kamini very keenly)* Let's see if I can do something about it...

Kamini : I alone will have to do it.

(Unmindful of Kamini's words, Kalidasa is engrossed in himself.

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Suddenly takes off his shoes. Holds his hands at the back. Barefooted, he walks round the stage in deep thought. Then standing in a corner, fixes his gaze on Kamini and reads out the unfinished composition in a self-absorbed state, as if creating ideas.)

Kalidasa : *(Intones the words with pauses) Kamale kamalotpattih shruyate na tu drishyate... (After a while) Shruyate na tu drishyate... shruyate na tu drishyate...*
(Then lost in self thought, speaks out the next line) Baale tav mukhambuje, drishtamindivar dwayam. Marvellous!... excellent! ... Lotus begets lotus; heard but never seen. O fair lass! On thy lotus like face I see two lotus like eyes... Lotus like face and eyes like lotus... isn't that lotus begetting lotus!

Kamini : *(With excitement) O fair lass! On thy lotus like face I see two lotus like eyes...* wonderful... lotus begetting lotus!... *(Overwhelmed with emotion)* Saraswati, the goddess of learning, resides on your tongue... so prompt... so beautiful... instant poetry! *(Pays her respect in his feet with joined hands)* You're venerable... and I've been blessed tonight! *(Kalidasa raises her by the shoulder and makes her sit on the bed. Then picking up a bhojpatra and pen, writes the last line on it and hands it over to Kamini.)*

Kalidasa : I have no claim over this... you must have been the inspiration behind the first line and now, you've inspired the second one as well... the emotions they arouse may differ.

Kamini : *(Amazed)* But...

Kalidasa : Get away from this darkness of ifs and buts... the first ray of the morning sun is eager to welcome the new empress of Sinhaladweep. This is not the time to look back. A new dawn awaits you. Go...
(Leaving her indecisive, Kalidasa moves towards the retiring room. In this state of mind, he even forgets his shoes behind. Kamini continues to sit unmoved, bhojpatra in hand. As he leaves, Kalidasa soliloquises) Friend Kumardasa, this is my wedding gift to you even before the wedding... heard, but never seen... *shruyate na tu drishyatel (Rajamma enters)*

Rajamma : *(Sarcastically)* May I arrange for you to rest if you're done playing host to wanderers and wayfarers? *(Kamini continues to sit unmoved. Rajamma draws closer)* Kamini!

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Kamini : *(Shows the bhojpatra)* Rajamma, his composition has been completed.

Rajamma : *(Overjoyed)* You don't say! When? So, the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep will have to marry you now!

Kamini : How will that be possible?

Rajamma : What's the difficulty now? The composition has been completed after all.

Kamini : But I didn't complete it...

Rajamma : Then?

Kamini : That wayfarer did it.

Rajamma : So, will your dream, which is mine as well, never materialise! Will all my hopes be dashed to the ground? *(Resolutely)* No... This shall not happen. *(After glancing warily in all directions)* Does anyone else know about this?

Kamini : No.

Rajamma : *(With a merciless resolve)* Nor shall anyone. Child, a few things are not to be divulged even to one's own self. No one shall know this secret now. No one but you have completed this composition. Understand!

Kamini : But that wayfarer...

Rajamma : He will be sent far away! He's a guest from a foreign land... he shall receive special hospitality... you wait for a while. *(Rajamma darts in with cautious steps)*

Kamini : *(Soliloquising)* How's it possible... to call someone else's composition your own... can the castle of one's dreams be built with bricks of falsehood?...Impossible...I shall fall in Kumar's esteem when he comes to know about it... it will be unseemly... Perhaps, it is my destiny... to languish thus in this golden cage... for life. *(Rajamma enters with a silver glass in hand. Kamini is sad. Weeps.)* Rajamma, it is not in my luck to be Kumardasa's bride.

Rajamma : *(In a firm tone)* How long can you cling on to fate? Wipe those tears. They don't light up dry lamps. My eyes have dried watching all this.

Kamini : *(With helplessness in her voice)* So, what can I do?

Rajamma : Listen, if you're asking me... serve this drink to that alien guest and let it be the last hospitality he will ever receive... I've brewed it with a herb from which even *yaksha deva* will not be able to protect him.

Kamini : *(Aghast)* No Amma, no...

Rajamma : *(Indignantly)* What do you mean no... the story of one's life can't be completed with unfinished compositions...

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(Indicating her beauty) Once this splendour is lost... you'll be stricken by poverty... no one will care to come to you... then you'll realise the ugliness of an aged courtesan's life... The loneliness of the vast rooms swept by cold wintry winds. *(Pushing the glass towards her)* Leave no options for your resolve, child... this is the moment of determination... you don't have to do anything... *(In a resounding voice)* Just remember that you have completed this composition. He's your guest... you're extending your hospitality to him.. *(Kamini holds the glass with trembling hands and looks at Rajamma)*

Keep your mind steady, or else even your hands will fail you... don't lose sight of your goal...

(Kamini moves towards Kalidasa's room. Kamini is repeatedly reminded of Rajamma's advice as it reverberates... "Only remember that you have completed this composition. He's your guest... you're only extending your hospitality to him..." Kamini leaves. Rajamma soliloquises.)

Those like us living in these mansions have to drink the poison of insult and contempt every time... Let someone else taste this poison today.

(Kamini returns with weary steps. Rajamma comes forward and takes her to the bed.)

Rest here tonight... and forget whatever has happened... think of your life ahead... the royal palace in Sinhaladweep awaits you.

(Making Kamini lie down, she sits by her side on the bed. The stage blacks out.)

Try to get some sleep, child.

(Suddenly the sound of something falling. Kamini gets up with a start. Rajamma too looks watchful.

Then Kalidasa is heard off-stage crying out.)

Kalidasa : Who's there? Is anyone there? *(Kalidasa, holding the glass in one hand and clutching his head with the other, comes out with staggering steps. Kamini and Rajamma look at him, aghast.)* What did this drink contain? What drink was this? What's wrong with me? *(Trying to steady himself)* Just a couple of sips and... I'm dizzy... Why's everything going dark before my eyes? My heart sinks... *(Wiping his forehead)* My forehead drips with sweat... Oh! who draws all the strength of my body through the feet?

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Why? What did you make me drink? *(Kamini gets up with a fright)*

: I do not know...

Kamini : Yes... you know... you do...why did you have to do this?

Kalidasa This suffocation... difficulty in breathing... as soon as I took this drink... No, this cannot be an ordinary drink... it's... it's poisoned. *(Places the glass somewhere)* A poison to eternal sleep...

(Slumps down. He can barely keep his eyes open. He keeps clutching his head. Kamini retreats a few steps in fright. Rajamma follows her)

Why did you have to do this? *(After some contemplation)* Now I know... so, you won't tell... and what can you say! You've poisoned me... couldn't trust me... *(With painful laughter)* The poet laureate... one of Vikramaditya's nine jewels... thus deceived us today! Death! The most definite unknown visitor... the Ultimate Truth... was to strike with such base deceit. You poisoned me because you couldn't trust me... Oh! Would I stake claim over a single line after having authored so many literary works?

Kamini : *(With astonishment)* Having authored many literary works? Who are you?

(Rajamma stops Kamini from coming forward)

Kalidasa : *(Unheeding Kamini's question, as if lost in self-thought)* But no... what has happened was decided not by a courtesan, and not tonight. The seed of this inauspicious hour had been several years ago sown by my wife Vidyottama... So, Vidyottama, the anguish of your heart, which you called curse, has borne fruit tonight...

Scene - VII

(Flashback: The garden in the royal palace of Ujjaini. Young Kalidasa is seen with Vidyottama.)

Vidyottama : *(In an anguished tone)* It was my fault, my lord... I scorned you. Even though our marriage was a conspiracy hatched by the officialdom. A conspiracy to mock my academic learning by inflicting a lifelong punishment on

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me... it was done out of spite. But I was at fault... I humiliated you...

Kalidasa : With goddess *Kali's* grace, I am no longer the dimwit you had been wedded to.

Vidyottama : I know that, my lord... but how can I forget that only you had to suffer the consequence, and for no fault of yours... only you...

Kalidasa : True, but that consequence was my holy communion.

Vidyottama : You say this out of humility, my lord...(*Carried away by her thoughts)* Even today I try to delude my memory... but the memory of those days in paralysing...I was deceived...The learned daughter of the Sovereign of Kashi was made a laughing stock by getting her married to a half-wit...At times I feel it wasn't I but a woman who was deceived...A woman whose crime was intelligence...her brilliance! You were made the instrument because of your simplicity. I wasn't annoyed with you...but the moment I realised that I had been deceived...deceived because I was brilliant... how could I keep my ire in check? How? You in front of me... so I wreaked vengeance on you for the wrongs done to me by the entire society...I humiliated you.

Kalidasa : *(In a controlled voice)* But that humiliation suffered at your hands became the biggest boon of my life. I worshipped Goddess *Kali* and received a boon from *Saraswati,* the goddess of learning.

Vidyottama : I wish to atone for my sins, my lord... try my patience no further... Please come... I wish to take you home with honour... my palace with its varied amenities looks desolate without you... like a head without the crown... please come with me.

Kalidasa : You're well aware my life has chosen a different course for itself.

Vidyottama : *(In a tone filled with pride)* It is my request... I'm making this humble request for the first time... Please come... the palace awaits you...

Kalidasa : *(With determination)* This is not possible any longer...

Vidyottama : *(In a hurt tone)* The reason?

Kalidasa : Vidyottama, highly learned daughter of the Sovereign of Kashi... I was very fortunate to have been scorned and humiliated by you. That humiliation changed the course of my life. It propelled me towards learning...

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It made me achieve such distinction that my composition *Meghdutam* finds favour in the royal assembly today. And the one who led me to this height of glory... how can I accept her in any form other than that of my *guru?* It will be a sin to think otherwise.

Vidyottama : Sin! But I'm your wife.

Kalidasa : Yes, you are... you've now acquired the status of my *guru.*

Vidyottama : *(Sarcastically)* Don't waste words, great poet... Say clearly that you reject me.

Kalidasa : Perhaps no man has ever exalted his wife to the status of his *guru*... I give you this respect...

Vidyottama : Do you call this respect? Abandoning the wife who has fallen at your feet seeking forgiveness?

Kalidasa : How can I explain, *Devi*...I've accepted you as my *guru*... what you propose is not possible now.

Vidyottama : Is that your final decision?

Kalidasa : *Devi*...

Vidyottama : *(Her face turning crimson)* So that's a husband's decision...a master's! Now, honourable husband, will you kindly explain what this abandoned wife should do with her life? What should she do with her life's desires? Her life depends on how her husband... you, great poet, wishes to lead his life. And you've made your decision... without any consideration for your wife... *(Sarcastically)* Decision... Yes, decision! A man's one-sided decision... unilateral as usual!

Kalidasa : *Devi... Devi...* please try to understand my predicament!... How can I give you that life now?

Vidyottama : *(Enraged)* Cannot give! But I can... Yes, I can... I can curse you. Let a woman be the cause of your life's doom... You've spurned your wife's desire... a desire she has all the right to... This conceited life of yours shall meet its doom at the hands of a woman whom your society treats as feeble and compels her to remain so. My curse shall not be in vain, great poet... never... never...

(Vidyottama leaves in a rage. Kalidasa is left standing speechless.)

(Flashback ends)

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Scene - VIII

(The scene before the flashback re-appears on stage, where, sitting on the bed in Kamini's guest room, Kalidasa is breathing his last. Kamini and Rajamma too stand with bated breath.)

Kalidasa : (*With a painful smile)* Life's deeds never go vain... Vidyottama's suffering did not go vain either... that's fate...
(Pointing towards Kamini) How can this weak, helpless, woman be blamed! If someone or something has to be blamed at all, it's Fate... Destiny... *(He is finding it hard to keep his eyes open. Wants to lie down, but resists himself... clutches his arm and shoulder every now and then.)* Friend Kumardasa... As I saw the sunrays dancing on the ocean... your poetry came to life images of nature... so beautiful... one of these images was yours... I'd even composed one on you... I regret, I couldn't bring it to you...*(Hearing Kumardasa's name, Kamini is startled once more. Rushes towards Kalidasa)*

Kamini : (*Flustered)* Who are you? Why don't you speak... who are you?

Kalidasa : Farewell, friend Kumardasa... Wretched Kalidasa leaves your land without having met you. (*Kalidasa lies down on the bed and breathes his last.)*

Kamini : *(Shrieks)* Kalidasa! Oh what have I done... he was Kalidasa! The great poet Kalidasa!

Rajamma : (*Screaming nervously)* Kalidasa! Kumardasa's friend! What have we done! *(Going out)* I'll get the physician... (*Calling out)* Saroja... Saroja... (*Rajamma leaves)*

Kamini : (*Crying)* The sea of poetic verse and beauty came to my door and I poisoned it... What have I done! When you learn of this Kumar, what will you think of me...how selfish... how mean ... I don't even deserve to ask forgiveness... how can I even face you with my contemptible person... but ... but what will I do without you? This spot... I shall never be able to wash away... and you will never be able to forget it... there's only one way out...
(Moves forward to pick up Kalidasa's glass and drinks the poison. Rajamma enters.)

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Rajamma : *(Bellows)* Kamini... Kamini, dear child ...*(Moves forward to support her. Almost sobbing)* Why did you do this, Kamini... what have you done ...
(Carefully, seats Kamini on the floor resting her against the bed. Kamini sits down clutching her head. Slowly she drifts into eternal sleep. Rajamma shakes her violently.) Kamini... Kamini... *(Soliloquising)* Nothing will be well now ... the greatest among poets, Kalidasa ... and now Kamini... nothing will be well now...nothing...*(Leaves distressed. The Sovereign of Sinhaladweep enters.)*

Kumardasa : *(With happy excitement)* Friend Kalidasa ... no matter what you masquerade as, this is the royal eye... It will seek you out... and you chose so well the place of your sojourn! ... so close to my heart... Where are you, friend? *(He is left speechless as he turns to look inside. Distraught with grief at the sight of the two dead bodies)* What's this... Kamini.... and this... *(Looks at Kalidasa, and figuring out something)* Is he not Kalidasa! But what... how... Kalidasa... all this... Kalidasa!
(Two soldiers enter. One of the soldiers is dragging Rajamma in. The other goes into the retiring room.)

Soldier-1 : Your Majesty... this courtesan says that Kamini poisoned Kalidasa and later killed herself by consuming the same poison.

Kumardasa : *(In astonishment)* Kamini ... poisoned Kalidasa ... *(With helplessness)* But why?

Rajamma : *(With joined hands, trembling)* Because she pined for someone's love...yearned to complete someone's unfinished composition... Kalidasa completed it ... *(Sobbing)* but her own life remained unaccomplished, like faith.
(The Sovereign of Sinhaladweep moves forward promptly and picks up the bhojpatras lying on the stool, reading aloud)

Kumardasa : *Kamale kamalotpattih shruyate na tu drishyate Baale tav mukhambuje, drishtamindivara dwayam. (The bhojpatra slips off his hand. Tears stream down his cheeks)* Kalidasa! *(Soldier-1 drags Rajamma away)*

Soldier-1 : Come along, you wicked witch...
(Soldier-2 comes out with a book and a scroll from the retiring room.)

Soldier-2 : Your Majesty, this book was found among the great poet's stationery.

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(Moves forward to hand over the copy of Meghdutam *to the Sovereign of Sinhaladweep, who receives it sobbing and examines it closely.)*

Kumardasa : Oh! *Meghdutaml (Raises it to his forehead)*

Soldier-2 : Your Majesty, there's also this letter addressed to you.

(Kumardasa hands the copy of Meghdutam *to Soldier-2, and with trembling hands, receives the letter and examines.)*

Kumardasa : It's not a letter, but a poem. Probably my Kalidasa's last composition! Addressed to me! *(Holds it to his heart, then holding Kalidasa's feet, wails aloud)* Forgive me, O, teacher-poet, pardon me! That you should have been made to suffer thus in my own country, and, on my account! Please forgive... forgive please.

(Kumardasa sees Kalidasa's shoes lying close to the stool. Moves ahead and picks them up. Holds them in his hands and looks at them.)

Now, in this era none can step into these shoes... these shoes too shall go with you, O, greatest of poets... Generations to come will only follow their imagined impressions... So what if you'll no longer live as a mortal... the devotee of *Kali*, you have conquered time *(Calling out crying)* Soldier! Let a huge pyre of sandalwood be laid... *(Directing his gaze at Kalidasa)* This fragrance of poesy can only be assimilated in sandalwood.

(Soldier-2, befuddled, looks at the King. Suddenly, the Sovereign leaves, scroll in one hand and Kalidasa's shoes in the other. Soldier-2, as if bewildered, follows him)

Oh dear Kalidasa! Ill-luck... My ill-luck... Wretched that I am... Kalidasa!

Scene - IX

(The same place on the stage and the same scene, but Kalidasa's body can no longer be seen on the bed. Kamini's neglected body is lying in the same place, unmoved. Rajamma enters with unkempt hair.)

Rajamma : Wailing lamentation rends the entire Sinhaladweep ...yes, lamentation... The flames towards the sky. Not even the ocean can quench them. *(Addressing Kamini's body)* And, you know what? ... your Kumardasa... with the fire-

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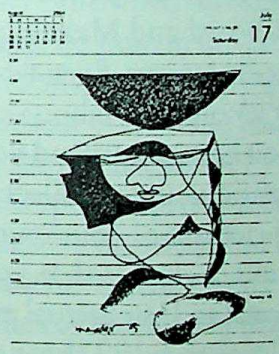
god as his witness... quit the world with Kalidasa ... He offered himself to the burning pyre. Look, what an end! Kalidasa will be immortal... Kumardasa's memory will live forever... forever! And you, child, are where you had been.. No one even came to claim your body. It suffered the same disgrace which is our lot... has been for ages... and shall remain to be... People will always remember the poisoning of Kalidasa, but none shall ever understand your flustered yearning to be Kumardasa's bride. No one... *(As if crazed)* Why did you drink that left-over poison, my child? Why? *(Sits exhausted)* Poison... poison we have been drinking for so long. The poison of deceit... the poison of neglect... of scorn... and who can tell how long this we'll keep drinking... this poison!

(Stepping forward on stage, as if broken down) No one has ever fathomed the torment we undergo in drinking this poison...no one has understood...no one!

Translated from Hindi by Manu Vikraman

❑



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Translation as Anāsaktiyōga

Ramesh Chandra Shah

Men of letters and fellow-traveller friends,

Translation is 'love's labour' and an absolutely necessary ingredient of national culture as well as of what now threatens to become our destiny — that is, the so-called planetary civilization. As members of a continental civilization and culture like Europe on the one hand, and China on the other, we Indians have every reason to rejoice in and celebrate all such occasions which serve to rekindle and reinforce our time-honoured—though often threatened—idea of India as an organic whole, as a globally significant object-lesson of unity in diversity. I rejoice in this opportunity to greet and felicitate each and everyone of my writer-friends here who have been honoured and rewarded today by the National Academy of Letters for their most valuable and soulful exertions. *Kleshah Phalen Punarnavatam Vidhatte* ....as the poet of *Kumarsambhava* says—greeting the happy conclusion of Parvati's tapasya and looking forward to celebrating the glorious consummation of this reunion of Word and Meaning Vak and Artha.

For, translation is literally tapasya. Even when it is genuine love's labour and not just hackwork or ideological labour-camp, it can be dauntingly exacting and hazardous. You have to suspend your personality—your very own hard-earned predispositions and predilections; you have to acquire a sort of negative capability—get out of your own body and mind to inhabit someone else's body and mind—forget that you have a self with its own crying needs, its own emotional and intellectual axes to grind. And, yet, when you have girded up your loins to fulfill these conditions and to take the inevitable plunge, are your worries over? No; other spectres are there, waiting in the wings, to haunt and confound your arduous exertions: the reluctant or the renegade publisher, the hungry judges ever ready to sign your death-sentence, your own rivals and unsuspected, unheard of arrivals in the trade...and sometimes, who knows the ways of Narcissus!—the

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disgruntled and innocently insatiable author himself, who, if he happens to belong to the same linguistic family, or, being blissfully confident of the superior virtues of his own divine mother-tongue, is deluded into imagining that the language into which he is so eager to be re-incarnated is, after all only a poor relation of his own tongue, and therefore, deserves to be shown its place.

And what about the author, who is condemned to become his own translator? God guard us all from such an ignominy and disaster for there is no disaster-management authority here to approach and appeal to in such adversity. I was once prevailed upon to submit two chapters of my novel *Gobar Ganesh* in English translation to a reputed publishing house. The response from the literary adviser was overwhelmingly prompt and ingratiating: he urged me to finish the work and make available to him the complete translated manuscript as soon as possible. I was foolhardy enough to take the gentleman at his word and plunge into the unenviable task. Oh my God! One can't imagine a more enervating and more soul-killing drudgery! One is forced to revisit and re-open the painful places of one's own consciousness, relive and re-enact all that one believed one had outgrown long ago. And...to what end? My manuscript came back to me by return of post without any comment—without even the mandatory regrets on the part of the agent who had inflicted on me that rigorous confinement for six months.

So, hats off to those who persist in this calling against the heaviest odds, who fare forward, thinking only of the action and not of the rewards in the spirit of *Gita's* 'anāsaktiyōga'. All this, however, applies only to those who are endowed with an intellectual conscience and a sense of vocation. As Llosa, the internationally renowned novelist, says, we are living in the age of charlatans and nothing, no human industry is as open, as vulnerable to charlatanism as that of translation. In my own literary milieu, I have to face the frequent embarrassment of noticing bad and incompetent, insensitive work being inflicted on the reading public by parties which have nothing to recommend themselves except a misplaced missionary zeal. Luckily, there are a few responsible and sensitive organizations like 'Katha' and the Sahitya Akademi itself which do care for and do ensure professional standards. Of course, they cannot stem the rot in a largely illiterate milieu. But they can at least expose and to some extent reduce the area of darkness.

For, translation is nothing if not professional—although in a gradually evolving literary society there certainly is a place for translations of foreign classics which may fall short of professional standards, but being inspired by honest intentions to assist in the growth of emotionally educated people, they do serve a useful purpose. Most of the people of my generation, I

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am sure, must have absorbed some foreign as well as some home classics in this way. I myself have grateful recollections of receiving my initiation into the world of Cervantes and Shakespeare through abridged Hindi versions, which presumably, as I understand now, could not have been perfect representations of the originals. But they did serve the important purpose of educating me emotionally as well as imaginatively. And what about the roots of our creative imagination in our own ancient epics and narratives? Were it not for the popular abridged Hindi versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the full-length translations of the Principal *Upanishads* as well as of classics like *Yogavashistha* on the one hand and *Hitopadesh* on the other, I doubt if I could ever gain a firm grounding in our ancestral heritage. Even now, if I am asked to recommend a suitable and adequate Hindi version of the epics for the younger generation, I find myself at a loss and can think of nothing better than the English abridgments by C. Rajgopalachari. But so far as its relationship with other Indian literatures is concerned, Hindi can be credited with a truly pan-Indian awareness and involvement. Most of the important works produced in the regional languages do become available in Hindi. Unfortunately, it is largely a unipolar and unreciprocated phenomenon—a similar curiosity and concern with the landmarks in Hindi poetry and fiction is hardly evidenced in the other regions like Bengal, Karnataka or Tamilnadu. In fact it is conspicuous by its absence as becomes abundantly clear in the course of any conversation with our contemporary writers in Bengali, Kannada or Tamil.

We are reminded of the situation in medieval times when bhākhā, the language of the heartland was playing the role of a cultural clearing house. How is one to realise and existentially authenticate the feeling that is enshrined in the motto chosen by the National Academy of Letters as the guiding spirit and the very raison d'etre of its existence? I once wrote an essay deploring the shortsightedness of our rulers, who were just content to tread in the footsteps of their colonial masters. How is it that no one thought of establishing a National School of Translation as the natural and inevitable means of actualizing and practicing the much-vaunted ideal of unity in diversity? That should have preceded the National School of Drama; it should have emerged simultaneously with the National Academy of Letters. Besides ensuring the availability of competent linguists and translators, it would have brought all the Indian languages together in a lively and urgent process of mutual understanding and interaction. The unitive status and function of Sanskrit on the one hand and Hindi on the other as the highest common factor and the lowest common denominator would then have become apparent to everyone through this enterprise and English too would have found its proper place and served its purpose under the law of diminishing utility.

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That was not to be; and it is idle to talk in terms of mere might-have-beens. But the idea of India lives on; and the urge to comprehend India in-and through its own terms has started gaining momentum now-a-days in spite of the cacophony of divisive and separatist noises. Some of you may wonder why then, I have chosen to address and exhort you thus through English instead of Hindi. In fact, to tell you the truth, I had prepared my speech originally in Hindi. But a glance at the names of the participants in the function made me revise my original intent. After all, I have been invited to witness a special cultural event called 'translation', in which most of the participants are from non-Hindi-speaking areas. I am required to address a motley gathering of translators from different Indian languages and therefore I must make myself heard and understood by them. At the least, I must ensure that I am not misunderstood. That is why I rewrote my speech in English. Needless to say that its not a translation from Hindi into English! It is an independent version, such as always happens with writing in different languages.

Friends, I would like to conclude this address on a note that is neither optimistic nor pessimistic; but rather a realistic one.

The teaching of our languages and literatures itself is endangered in our country today. We must remember that only a robust and self-confident civilization can create a high culture of translation. It is not difficult to see that a people lacking in cultural confidence are bound to live in an eternity of second-hand. They can only contribute to an *anuvādjīvī* or derivative culture. It can be taken care of only if we do not lose sight of that in-built confidence in our own way of walking upon the earth.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen, for giving me a patient hearing. Thanks to the Akademi as well, for giving me this opportunity to meet and talk to you.

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* Chief Guest's address at the translation Prize and Bhasha Samman function at Bhopal, 2006.

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Karbala as Metaphor in the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

Nishat Zaidi

Aanche jaane aashiqan az dast hijrat min kushad
Kas na deeda dar jahan juz kushtagaan e Karbala
(Hafiz)

(No one in this world knows
The anguish of separation from the Beloved
As would the martyrs of Karbala)

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—
Listen: it means
"The Beloved" in Persian "witness" in Arabic.

For a poet determined to chart out "separation's geography", having a name which semantically shared boundary with the leit-motif of Karbala as expressed in the above couplet by Hafiz was not a mere co-incidence. It was a co-incidence that he lived and embraced in his poetry to explore his own identity. A Kashmiri-Indian, an Asian-American, a Shiite-Muslim, Agha Shahid Ali has used the Karbala metaphor to communicate his own hyphenated existence, his personal pain (the death of his mother), his experience of exile, a communal loss caused by political apathy (strife-stricken Kashmir), and the universal phenomenon of pain. Not only this, by placing the metaphor of Karbala in the center of his poetic oeuvre, a member of the much ignored South Asian Community in US, Agha Shahid Ali has also exposed his American/ English readers to an entirely new idiom of poetry drawn from the Orient. The metaphor of Karbala is not unfamiliar to those who are familiar with the Persio-Arabic and Urdu tradition of poetry. The poetic genre of *'Marsia'* (Elegy) has been skillfully

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used by the poets of these traditions, to render the events of Karbala in graphic details. In Twentieth Century, it has also been used by these poets to comment about their contemporary ethos.(1) Urdu *Ghazal* and *Nazm* poetry has also over the years turned to the events of Karbala to articulate themes as varied as Love's suffering (Mir Taqi Mir), partition and other sociopolitical themes (Iftekhar Arif and Ahmad Faraz), social injustice (Ali Sardar Jafri), Gender issues (Parveen Shakir) etc. Urdu Criticism has also registered a strong presence of this central metaphor from Islamic history. (2) This paper aims to explore the presence of metaphor of Karbala in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and establishes that Shahid's usage of this very popular metaphor of Urdu poetry in English is significant from more than one perspective.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in 1949 in New Delhi in a Shiite Muslim family. His ancestors came to Kashmir from Samarkand, Central Asia. His grandmother, one of the most educated women in Kashmir was the Inspector of Women's school and could quote poetry in Urdu, Farsi, Kashmiri and English. Shahid's father Agha Ashraf Ali who did his Ph.D. in Comparative Education from Ball State Teacher's College in Munich, Indiana, US, taught at Jamia Millia University, New Delhi and later became Principal of the Teacher's College in Srinagar. His mother Sufia Naumani belonged to Rudauli in Uttar Pradesh to a family known for its Sufi heritage. This family background of Agha Shahid Ali played a significant role in shaping his personality and interests as he himself said in one of his lectures:

> Significantly not only was all my training in school in English... but paradoxically, my first language was/is not my mother tongue. Which is Urdu.....I did not choose to write in English. It happened that way naturally....I was brought up a bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being....These loyalties, which have political and cultural and aesthetic implications became so entangled in me that they led not to confusion but to strange arresting clarity. (Shahid Ali: 1992:2)

Having grown on the backdrop of this twin culture, Agha Shahid Ali, who received his education in Srinagar, Delhi and US and later on settled in US as a professor of Creative writing, was very much conscious of the intricacies underlying the composite culture of India. As a diasporic Indian poet writing in English, Agha Shahid Ali always took it upon himself to be a cultural ambassador, rather than a refugee— "What is someone of nearly two equal loyalties to do but lend, almost gift them to each other and hope that sooner or later the loan will be forgiven and they will become each other's?"(Shahid Ali: 1992:2). Shahid's poetry does perform this very

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unique task of highlighting the composite culture of India on the one hand — his poems are replete with the images of Radha, Krishna, Laila, Majnoo, Budhism and Hinduism and Sufism and Bhakti(3) — and lending this culture and form to his Western audiences and training their ears to the Eastern poetic tradition on the other hand.(4) It is thus not surprising that Shahid's inspirations were as varied as James Merrill, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Mirza Ghalib and Begum Akhtar.

The central themes of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry like all other Indian poetry in English(5) are love, loss, separation and search—for home, for lost relationships for identity, for life and even for death. If his poems display a consistent engagement with the perennial theme of human suffering, they also exhibit an acute awareness of the contemporary political issues and the ground realities on part of the poet. Among various metaphors used by Agha Shahid Ali to take meaning to its manifold levels, the metaphor of Karbala stands out as the most pervasive one. Speaking about the significance of the language of metaphor for those occupying the "interstitial, liminal" space, Homi Bhabha comments:

> The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging across those distances and cultural differences that span the imagined community of the nation people. (Bhabha: 1991: 139-140)

The language of metaphor weaves the warp and woof of Shahid Ali's poetry as the very titles of his anthologies suggest—The *Half-Inch Himalayas, The Country Without A Post Office, A Nostalgist's Map of America, Rooms are Never Finished.* Among all these, the metaphor of Karbala occupies a central position and it's undercurrent is felt across all other metaphors that the poet has used. Karbala to Shahid was not just a matter of culture, but as a Shiite Muslim, it was to him a matter of faith as well. Drawing from the religious and cultural storehouse, Agha Shahid Ali honed this metaphor into an aesthetic mode that was totally new to English poetry. In his lecture, delivered in a workshop organized by Katha, Agha Shahid Ali spoke of Faiz Ahmad Faiz(6) " his genius lay in his ability to balance his politics with aesthetics without compromising either."(Shahid Ali: 1992:2) This is precisely what Shahid himself aspired to do. He believed that for a poet his craft must come first and the ideological leanings and political awareness should be secondary. It is this very fusion of politics and aesthetics, personal and universal that Agha Shahid Ali has tried to achieve by using the metaphor

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of Karbala. Even though Karbala finds its presence in many covert ways in almost all writings of Agha Shahid Ali, it is his last volume, *Rooms Are Never Finished,* which brings the metaphor of Karbala to the foreground. "Karbala: A History of the 'House of Sorrow' " forms the first section of the poem "From Amherst to Kashmir". It gives the poet's own account of the metaphor, explains amply the relationship he shares with it, the personal emotions he finds echoed in this and the manner in which he would like his readers to relate to this:

> Jesus and his disciples, passing through the plain of Karbala, saw "a herd of gazelles, crowding together and weeping." Astonished, the disciples looked at their Lord. He spoke, "At this site the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) will one day be killed." And Jesus wept. "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain." And Jesus wept. And as if the news has just reached them—fourteen hundred years after the Battle of Karbala (near Ancient Babylon, not far from the Euphrates) in the year AH 61/ AD 680—mourners weep for "the prince of martyres", Hussain, grandson of the Prophet and son of Ali ("Father of Clay") and Fatima (the Prophet's only surviving child). Memorializing Hussain on the tenth of Muharram (Ashura) is the rite of Shi'a Islam—so central that at funerals those events are woven into elegies, every death framed by that "Calvary", For just "as Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the Cross". Hussain "went to Karbala to accept the passion that had been meant for him from the beginning of time. (RANF:24)

This is followed by Agha Shahid Ali's rendering in lyrical prose a brief account of the events of Karbala which he says he has drawn from Will Durant's *The Age of Faith;* Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai's *Shi'a;* David Pinalult's *The Shiites;* Heinz Halm's *Shi'a Islam: From Religion To Revolution;* and S. Hussain M Jafri's *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam.* The sources used by Agha Shahid Ali make it clear that by using the Western as well as Muslim scholarship, the poet wanted his account to appear convincing to his western audiences. This brief account of the event of Karbala is significant as it includes all pertinent information of this heart-wrenching event of Islamic history. It also, through a mixed use of the dramatic and narrative voices, intensifies the pathos and develops vividly the universal human aspect of the event. This aspect becomes prominent given the structure of the book. The book consists of four major sections

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and "Karbala: A History...." is the first poem of the first section "From Amherst To Kashmir". But these Four Sections are preceded by a long poem "Lennox Hill", a dirge to the dying mother, which, given the architectonics of the book, functions like an overarching dome. So deep is the wound inflicted on the poet's psyche by the death of the mother that the poet laments,

> Then let the universe,
> Like paradise, be considered a tomb. Mother,
> They ask me, *So how's the writing?* I answered *My mother*
> *Is my poem*.....
> Each page is turned to enter the griefs account—
> .....
> .....*The beloved leaves one behind to die*
> For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir
> And what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
> When I remember you... beyond all accounting— O my mother?
> (RANF: 18-19)

The poet believes that the grief caused by the death of the mother outweighs not just the grief of the strife-stricken Kashmir, but also of the universe. The poet's account of Karbala in "Karbala: A History..." following these self-indulgent moments of overwhelming personal grief caused by the death of the mother, places Karbala in a special relationship vis-a-vis the poet, his creative gift and his readers. After recapitulating the event, the poet sums up:

> Mourners beg for water—the martyr's thirst. They wound their heads and "the green grassy field where their processions end "becomes bloodied and looks like a field of poppies". *And my brother knows he will die. He has himself put on his shroud.* A deluge of weeping follows. I remember since childhood. One *majlis* stays— Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned everyday Kashmir into some family's Karbala. We celebrated Ashura with relatives, in the afternoon—because of the night curfew. The evening at home, my mother was suddenly in tears. I was puzzled, then very moved: Since she was a girl, she had felt Zainab's grief as her own. At my mother's funeral a mourner sang one of her favourite Kashmiri elegies, given to Zainab, in which her exile is nearly unbearable. Those words now

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are my mother's for she too was tired, fighting death,
from hospital to hospital, from city to city. (RANF: 25)

This moving rendering of the event of Karbala operates at manifold levels as far as the semantic and emotional environment of Shahid Ali's poetic oeuvre is concerned. We can briefly sum it up as follows:

A- As a practicing Shiite Muslim, the poet is able to resign to his deep personal loss by "memorializing Hussain" — a central "rite of the Shiite Islam".

B- Since a metaphor is an interactional device based on the connection established between the two apparently dissimilar terms, much in the working of a metaphor depends on the reader's knowledge of the discontinuous term. The reader, thus, becomes an active participant in the decoding of a metaphor. The target audience of Agha Shahid Ali (mainly English and American) being unfamiliar with the Karbala and its significance for Muslim psyche, it was imperative for him to connect it to them and he does so not just by supplying information but by creating empathy. He begins the story of Karbala with Jesus's lament over the future death of Hussain and draws parallel of the ritualistic memorializing of Hussain in Muharram by Shi'as with the "Calvary" in Christianity.

C- Several years before the event of Karbala and centuries after the event, mourning over Hussain unfolds the universal dimension of the event and its larger than life significance in the history of mankind.

D- Karbala is not just a matter of religious faith but also a part of culture as suggested by the poet's reference to the "celebration of Ashura with relatives".

E- The poet's love for his mother draws him closer to the event of Karbala because "ever since she was a girl she had felt Zainab's grief as her own" and in the poet's subconscious, the words given to Zainab in Kashmiri elegies become words of his mother.

F- Given the poet's assertion "my mother is my poem", his poetry naturally weaves this series — poet-mother-Karbala-Kashmir-readers — in the warp and woof of aesthetic mode.

G- The mother's identification with Zainab's grief caused by her own longing for the homeland Kashmir makes the poet connect with the situation in Kashmir also. In the preface of "Lennox Hill" he tells us " To a home at war, my father, siblings and I brought my mother's body for burial. It was the only thing to do, for she

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had longed for home throughout her illness. In 1990, Kashmir — the cause of hostility between India and Pakistan since their creation in 1947 — erupted into a full scale uprising for self-determination. The resulting devastation—large scale atrocities and death....has led to despair and rage, then only rage, then only despair." (RANF: 15)

Thus the questions which the poet, driven by his personal grief and loss, raises in "Lennox Hill" are answered in "Karbala: History of a 'House of Sorrow' ". The poet sets out to reinvent his association with his surroundings by using Karbala as the central metaphor in the book. David Sapir defines metaphor as "a figure of speech that in a variety of ways places into juxtaposition two terms that are or can be thought of both similar and dissimilar. That is out of the features defining one term and those defining the other, there will be number shared by both the terms."(Sapir and Crocker: 1977:6) Metaphor thus is a device where both the topics retain their individuality. IA Richards, in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), introduced the term 'tenor' for the subject to which the metaphoric term is applied and the term 'vehicle' for the metaphoric word itself. In this sense, metaphor of Karbala not only acts as a cathartic force on the grief-torn psyche of the poet but it also reaffirms and rejuvenates the Shiite faith of the poet — a faith that sees Karbala as a reference point for all moments of personal and social crisis. Thus the poet, who sets out to explore "separation's geography" and "chronicling the loss" in the book, moves across time and space with Krishna, Radha, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Begum Akhtar, Ghalib, Lorca, James Merrill, Syria, Andalusia, Damascus, Boston, Frankfurt, Delhi, Srinagar all melting into one. It transforms, in the process, the poet's deep sense of personal loss into just another "chronicle of loss" and his narrow initial belief that "the beloved leaves one behind to die"(RANF: 21) to a broader vision and better understanding of life, "the loved ones always leave"(RANF: 104).

The second poem "Zainab's lament in Damascus" in the series "From Amherst to Kashmir" — a series that tracks poet's thoughts as he is flying with his mother's dead-body back home for burial — again brings the metaphor of Karbala to the fore. While the first poem "Karbala: A History...." reveals the events of Karbala with the focus on Hussain, this poem deliberates upon the happening at Damascus with Zainab in the center. In this way Agha Shahid Ali has amalgamated the two focal events of Karbala (7) into his metaphoric tool — the connecting link between the two provided by the mother. Having hinted in the closing note of "Karbala: A History..." that Zainab's words "now are my mother's", it is natural for the poet to lend his own ears as well as those of his readers to Zainab's

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lament. Zainab's is not a self-indulgent lament but being one "who of passion never made a holocaust"(RANF: 27), it has a missionary purpose — "I alone am left to tell my brother's story" (RANF: 28). The tyranny of history is such that Prophet's own grandson, Zainab's brother Hussain is slain with his family and children—

> Hear me. Remember Hussain,
> What he gave in Karbala, he the severed
> Heart, the very heart of Muhammad left there
> Bleeding, unburied. (RANF: 27)

Zainab's lament thus is a call to awaken the conscience of history. The poem, apparently a literal translation of mother's favourite Kashmiri elegy *'Nauha'* (8) sung by mourners at her funeral, shifts the focus from the mother to Zainab. This transfiguration brought about by the metaphoric use of Karbala, has a cathartic impact on the poet. He, who once felt that "the beloved leaves one behind to die," is able to survive his mother's death and find resonance of his grief in many other events manifesting the universal phenomenon of pain. The poem is an example of implicit metaphor as it does not mention the tenor i.e. the mother and her grief.

There are two ways in which the interaction or relationship between the two topics of metaphor is established. First, the reduction of terms to their shared features, to what makes them alike and secondly the transference from one to another, mainly from the discontinuous term to continuous, of what they do not share, of what makes them unlike. (Sapir and Crocker: 1977:9) The metaphor of Karbala in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry also functions at various planes. It supplies discontinuous term to more than one continuous term (such as mother's longing for home, the situation in Kashmir, poet's own sense of exile and his sense of loss at his mother's death etc). It interacts with these themes at semantic and lexical levels. It also pervades his poetry at the level of tone and mood, which is all through autumnal and desolate.

Mother's longing for home, while struggling for life from hospital to hospital in Amherst, USA, is compared by the poet to Zainab' wail while she is taken from Karbala to Kufa to Damascus:

> You wait, at the end of memory, with what befell
> Zainab-
>
> From Karbala to Kufa to Damascus
> You are wearing black. The cry of gazelle

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Fills the night — It is Zainab's cry — You cry it for us
So purely that even in memory it lets memory cease.
("Summers of Translation" RANF: 32)

Thus the memory of mother's complete empathy with Zainab's grief, subsides the intensity of poet's own grief at the death of the mother –

Karbala's slaughter
Through my mother's eyes at the majlis, mourning
Zainab in Damascus court, for she must
Stand before the Caliph alone, her eyes my
Mother's, my mother's

Hers across these centuries....
We had with Zainab's
words returned home.

Hussain I'm in exile from exile, lost from
City to city. ("Above the Cities" RANF: 34)

The poet's memory of his mother mourning over Zainab's exile, her own sense of exile while dying in alien lands in Amherst, the poets own sense of exile while returning home with his mother's dead body, all are echoed in exile of the martyrs of Karbala:

All of a sudden
Through the haze the crated shrine's taken past us
When it's gone, I know she was trying to tell me –
What? For veiled, her voice is the veil itself. O
Father of clay, your

Daughter Zainab wanders in the thirst. The Prophet's
Blood is streams on Karbala's sand. What truth's here?
Hussain is dead and she is caught in exile, lost from
City to city. ("New Delhi Airport" RANF:39)

The poet also finds resonance of his personal grief at the death of mother in the metaphor of Karbala. Carrying his mother's coffin back home from Amherst to Kashmir, the poet feels –

Pilgrims brought back clay from that sight of
slaughter –
.....
.....
We are such pilgrims

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Too, returning thus with her shrine.
("New Delhi Airport" RANF.39)

Grief for the mother coincides with the grief for the dying motherland and the poet, to put in perspective the situation in Kashmir, again evokes the metaphoricity of Karbala:

Summer 1992 — when for two years Death had turned
Every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala.
("Karbala: A History..." RANF: 26)

The night was broken into two by the call to prayer
Which found nothing to steal but my utter disbelief
In every home, although Moharram was not here yet
Zainab wailed. Only Karbala could frame our grief.

Karbala was chosen for Kashmir's seasons
Mixed into graveyard's cold bed of roses.
(New Delhi Airport: *RANF:* 39)

Karbala, which is a symbol of a "man's passion" that was always meant for him" seems to be the right metaphor for a land where "freedom's terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir / is bringing love to its tormented glass" ("After The August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan" TCWPO: 64). "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992" in *The Country Without Post Office* again uses the metaphor of Karbala for the prevailing situation in Kashmir—

Death flies in, thin bureaucrat, from plains—
A one way-passenger, again.
In the Vale the children are dead or asleep.
He descends. The Colonel salute: A Captain starts up the jeep.
The Mansion by the lake awaits him with roses. He is driven
Through the streets bereft of children: they are dead not asleep.
O when will our hands return if only broken?

The mansion is white, lit up with roses. He is driven
Through the streets, in which blood flows like Hussain's
Our hands wont return to us, not even mutilated, when
Death comes — thin bureaucrat — from the planes.

(TCWAP:58)

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Thus by connecting the blood of Kashmiris with Hussain's, Agha Shahid Ali registers his faith in the cause of Kashmiris and expresses his anger against the unjust atrocities wrought by the state machinery in the state. The imagery of children dead or asleep also brings to our mind the devastated remnants in the eve following the battle of Karbala and the haunting silence that the cruel dance of death had ensued in the desert of Karbala. Sigmund Freud in his famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia" proposes that mourning is a psychic state, in which a loss is recognized as loss whereas melancholia implies an incorporation of the lost object into the libido, often leading to immobilization of psyche. While melancholia holds an open relationship with the past through the unconscious, in mourning there is a conscious recognition of loss and a detachment made possible through remembering. Thus, mourning is marked by memorializing through memory, whereby, a loss is recognized as past. Mourning in the poetic oeuvre of Agha Shahid Ali occupies the same approach. By re-writing the trauma of Kashmiris and by linking it to the tragedy of Karbala, Shahid Ali finds a discursive space for communal mourning, which in turn helps in the recognition of loss and a movement away from the past. Besides, it is also an attempt to break from historicism, which always empathizes with the dominant, the victor.

The script based semantic theory of metaphor posits a lexicon of scripts, which are graphs with lexical nodes and semantic links between the nodes. The theory holds that metaphor occurs when two or more scripts which are incompatible but which share the nodes combine. The metaphoric usage of Karbala mentioned above is mostly achieved with the interaction at the semantic level only. Usage of this one of the core metaphors of Urdu/Arabic/and Persian tradition into English at the lexical level involved some inherent issues of the link between language and its history and culture. But Agha Shahid Ali made conscious attempts to overcome this difficulty, as he once said, "English would have to be renewed and reworked "translated" even, before it could be used by poets like me to meet the demands of hybrid culture situation"(Agha Shahid Ali: 1992:3) Agha Shahid Ali resolves this problem by first introducing the metaphor in English language (in "Karabala: A History of the 'House of Sorrow' and 'Zainab in Damascus' "), and then picking up lexical nodes from there, (such as slain, grief, weeping, desert, water, thirst, exile from exile, night, darkness, tyranny, children, blood, doomsday, caravan, Kufa, Damascus etc.), to evoke the reference to Karbala. The following examples are noteworthy:

> Doomsday barely begins when it repeats its beginning
> (for what is doomsday but the Beloved's departure?)

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and I again remember you leaving with the caravan of
dawn.(RANF: 48)

Desolation's desert. Im here with shadows
Of your voice, your lips as mirage, now trembling.
(RANF: 37)

Violins weep for a time that does not return
Violins weep for a homeland that might return.
(RANF: 92)

At a certain point I lost track of you.
They make desolation and call it peace
When you left even the stones were buried:
The defenseless would have no weapons.
(TCWPO: 7)

But first the screened mirror, all I knew of water
Imagine the thirst quenching virtue of water.

It was dark time and everywhere the soldiers
Had made sure we were thirsty for the garrisoned water.
(CMIT: 55)

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.
You learn your strange fate; you were exiled by exiles

Will you beloved stranger ever witness Shahid?
Two destinies at last reconciled by exiles. (CMIT: 29)

In all these examples, the lexical nodes combine scripts apparently dissimilar at the semantic level, thus imbuing language with immensely vast possibilities of interpretation. Recurrent allusions to various dimensions of the event of Karbala highlight the repetitive pattern of history where human suffering is caused by the atrocities, which the lust for power unleashes. In this, individual suffering becomes a manifestation of the universal phenomenon. But the effort to make "English behave outside its aesthetic habits" is not without its own difficulties and in his Ghazal "Beyond English" the 'bi-cultural', 'Bilingual' poet Agha Shahid Ali resolves this problem by switching language code:

I have known some words of war, all of them sharp
But the sharpest one is Jung — beyond English.

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared
He is waging war (no, Jung) beyond English.
(CMIT: 68-69)

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"Jung" here instantly takes us to the battle of Karbala *(Jung-I-Karbala)*. If Hussain waged war for Truth, Shahid Ali is also a crusader – a crusader of the truth of aesthetics, something he always placed over and above all thematic engagements.

Besides these direct and referential metaphoric usages of Karbala, the fundamental tone in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is elegiac all through with the desolate landscape, dead or dying people, separation from the beloved etc. inspiring the poetic muse. The poet feels a metaphysical anguish at this universal drama of pain that existence implies. But instead of avoiding it, he repeatedly revisits it as part of the deliberate choice. This gives him fresh insights into the realities of life and here again the basic inspiration is drawn from the martyrs of Karbala who embraced death consciously.

Karbala thus acts as the central metaphor in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali. A metaphor of exile, homelessness, loss, and an unflinching faith in love and submission, it represents everything that Shahid's poetry stands for. The interactional aspect of metaphor generates a double-vision where both the topics are enlightened by the connection established between them. Kenneth Burke opines that the metaphor asserts not only "thisness of that" but also "thatness of this"(qtd. in Sapir and Crocker: 1977). The metaphor of Karbala in the poetic oeuvre of Agha Shahid Ali, if on the one hand clarifies his relationship with his homeland Kashmir, throws light on his grasp of the political situation in Kashmir, transforms his personal experience of pain and loss into-an insight into the universal phenomenon pain, on the other, it also reaffirms the universality of the events of Karbala itself, its potential to reflect all possible dimensions of human suffering and human will – a belief that constitutes the core of Shiite ritual of "memorializing Hussain"on the Tenth of Muharram.

Notes

1. *Urdu Marsia* developed as an independent genre in literature, by the efforts of Mir Zamir and Mir Khalikh and was later honed by its great practitioners Mir Anees and Mir Dabeer. In Twentieth Century Josh Malihabadi and Jameel Mazhari have addressed contemporary issues also in their *Marsia.*
2. Besides a number of books on *Rasai Adab* (Elegy literature), considerable work has also been done to account for the presence of the historical event of Karbala and its various figurative usage by the Urdu poets. See: Gopi Chand Narang, *Sanih-I-Karbala Bataur She'ri Istayara,* Delhi: Educational Publication House, 1984.
3. See the poems by Agha Shahid Ali, "Homage to Faiz Ahmad Faiz", "In Memory of Begum Akhtar" "The Season of the Planes" (THIH), "Lennox Hill", "Film Bhajan Found on 78 RPM"(RANF), "From Another Desert" (ANMA) etc.

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4. Agha Shahid Ali's *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English,* Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.2000, is the best example of Shahid Ali's attempt to sensitize western ears to the Eastern poetic forms. The book is a collection of Ghazals by 107 poets including John Hollander, J.D. McClatchy, Maxine Kumine, etc.
5. "Indian poetry in English, we can safely assert is a meronym for several things: gloom, search, loss, emptiness and despair" — see Pramod K. Nayar, "The Google Theme: New Poetry, 2002-2003", *Chandrabhaga,* 9/2004, Pp.65-94.
6. Agha Shahid Ali translated Faiz Ahmad Faiz into English, see *The Rebel's Silhouette,* New Delhi: OUP. 1992.
7. A Persian couplet aptly sums it up: "Kahani Din Ki Do Baab Ast, Karbala wa Damishk / Yak-e-Hussain raqam kard deegari Zainab" (The story of religion has just two chapters — Karbala and Damishk / One inscribed by Hussain and the other by Zainab) qtd. By G. C. Narang in *Saaniha-e-Karbala..,* p.85
8. Along with *marsia, nauha* is an integral part of the elegy literature(*Rasai Adab).* It means loud lamentation with beating of breast using words. See — Syed Athar Raza Bilgrami, "Nauha :Rasai Adab Ka Aham Satoon wo Qaumi Yakjahti Ka Aaina", *Raah-e-Islam,* 174, April-June2002.

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Writing Between the Lines: The Politics and Poetics of Translation

R. Parthasarathy

A story that one heard in the old days at Oxford was that you had only to speak on India to empty a room of its audience. I hope this audience will be more forbearing. I am honoured to be asked to give this year's Moseley Lecture.

To translate is to rewrite—to rewrite in another language; in my case, rewriting in a language I was not born into. Bilinguals are never at home in any language. They only inhabit a language when they use it. The monolingual has, on the other hand, an assured identity in his language. He inhabits it at all times. He is to be envied.

To one writer above all I am most indebted. For over three decades he has fueled my thinking on India and its traditions, especially on matters of language. Whatever I know about the nature of the Word I've learned it from him. The Neustadt laureate Raja Rao is a writer's writer, and it is with great pleasure I dedicate this lecture to him as a thank offering to the guru.

Indians are necessarily bilingual, and in a multilingual society such as India, translation from one language into another, historically from Sanskrit into the eloquent vernaculars, is of vital importance in keeping open the channels of communication, and preserving the cohesiveness and integrity of the nation. Translation is one of the central tasks of the Indian nation-state whose very survival depends upon it. Translation keeps alive the people's consciousness as Indians and not just as Tamils, Maharashtrians, Punjabis, or Bengalis.

Historically, there has always been a lingua franca used by an influential group of speakers for communication with speakers of other languages. From about 500 BCE to about 1000 CE, Sanskrit was in fact the language

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of literature and scholarship throughout much of India, except perhaps in the extreme south. Its prestige was unrivaled and has not been equaled since by any other language, including English. For Sanskrit embodies, as no other Indian language does, all that is best and finest in the genius of India. It was in Sanskrit that Panini (4th c. BCE) wrote his definitive grammar of the language; Kalidasa (5th c. CE), his plays and long poems; Vidya (7th c.), her short poems; Vatsyayana (3rd c.), his manual on the art of love; Aryabhata (6th c.), his astronomy and mathematics; and Samkara (8th c.), his philosophy.

The Nature of the Word

In order to understand the history of translation in India, we need to understand what Indians thought about the nature of language. The locus classicus is the following hymn from the Rig Veda (10.71.4), the earliest literary text of the Indo-European people:

> One who looked did not see the word,
> one who listened did not hear it.
>
> *uta tvah pasyan na dadarsa vacam,*
> *uta tvah srnvan na srnotyenam.*

The hymn emphasizes the fact that the Word (*vac*) is not revealed to everyone. The uninitiated have no access to it. It was a closely guarded secret of the Brahman priesthood. The Word was not written down; it was only communicated orally. For once it was written down, it was no more than a dead letter. It lost its sacred power and ceased to be a mantra. Under the circumstances, translation was an abomination. For how could the language of the gods, *deva-vani*, as Sanskrit was regarded, be translated into any human tongue? It was simply inconceivable. And so the Rig Veda was not written down until much later. In fact, for over 2,000 years it was orally transmitted—all of its 1,028 hymns comprising about 21,200 lines—from one generation to another by priestly families, a process that has continued to this day. It is a phenomenon that has no parallel anywhere else. This explains why the Rig Veda had not been translated in its entirety into any Indian language until recently (there are now translations in Hindi, Kannada, and Telugu), although complete translations began appearing in the nineteenth century in French (1848-51), English (1850-88), and German (1876-77)—a monument to Europe's fascination with Sanskrit.

Translation is, I believe, an attempt to give voice to the voiceless languages of the world. By translating Indian literature into an international

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language such as English, I am enabling the writers to be read outside their linguistic frontiers. Readers will then hopefully come to the conclusion that Tamil and Sanskrit poetry are in no way inferior to Greek and Latin poetry.

My translations have thus a political bias: to gain recognition for the literatures of India so that an informed reader can talk about Ovid (43 BCE-? CE 17) and Amaru (7th c.) in the same breath. This is no easy task, but it is worth attempting. Translation is subversive writing. The translator unearths long-forgotten classics and puts them into orbit, thus redrawing the literary map. He is a "hidden persuader."

Translating India

How does one translate India? One way of doing it would be to translate from the language that is most completely possessed by the spirit of India, and that language is Sanskrit. Through Sanskrit the spirit of India has been passed on to other Indian languages. Through Sanskrit India continues to speak to the world.

It was in English that the first complete translation of a Sanskrit text appeared. This was Charles Wilkins's (1749-1836) translation of the Bhagavad-gita, published in 1784 in Calcutta by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. This was followed in 1789 and 1794 by William Jones's (1746-94) translations: Kalidasa's *Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection* (5th c.) and *The Laws of Manu* (2nd c. BCE-2nd c. CE), respectively. Thus Wilkins and Jones were the first to translate India for the benefit of Europe. Raymond Schwab sums up best the impact that these translations had on Europe: "As a complete world that can be placed alongside the Greco-Roman heritage, there is none other. . . . For the first time the image of India regally entered the configuration of the universe."

We must not allow ourselves to forget that politics was the moving force behind these earliest translations of Sanskrit texts in the eighteenth century. Warren Hastings (1732-1818), the governor-general of Bengal, encouraged Wilkins and Jones in their translations, since a first-hand knowledge of Indian traditions would be invaluable in governing India. The relationship between England and India was a relationship of power and domination. Translation was an instrument of policy that helped in orientalizing India so that it became a province of European thought. It is therefore not surprising that Indian literature in English translation has usually been read in terms of Western poetics, an inappropriate approach originating in the political aims of *pax Britannica*. I consider the Eurocentric view of Indian literature as essentially hegemonic. Today, we need to set right the imbalance

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by reading Indian literature in terms of Indian poetics and in the context of the Indian worldview.

How did English become such an influential language in India? British policy dictated that English be institutionalized as the medium of instruction in Indian education, and this is precisely what the English Education Act of 1835 did. The historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59), president of the governor-general's Council on Education declared, with the hubris of an empire-builder, in his now infamous minute on "Indian Education" (February 2, 1835): "I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. . . . A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Though Macaulay himself admitted that he did not know a word of either Sanskrit or Arabic, his word was good enough for the governor-general, William Bentinck (1774-1839). The underlying assumption seems to be that what is not in the West is not worth knowing, or that it is inferior. Allow me to give just one example to explode this myth. The discovery by European scholars of Panini's Sanskrit grammar, "The Eight Chapters" or the *Astadyayi*, usually dated 4th c. BCE, revolutionized the science of linguistics in the nineteenth century. No European language, not even Greek and Latin, had previously been described with such scientific exactitude.

Throughout history, languages have been powerful tools in defining and shaping empires, and English was no exception. *Pax Britannica* paved the way for English to become the first truly global language the planet has ever known "on which the sun does not set." The preeminence of English reached a climax after 1945 with the rise of American political and economic power and the spread of American pop culture around the world. Today, a fourth of the world's population, that is, about 1.5 billion people, is literate in English.

Over a period of two hundred years, all the major Sanskrit texts became available in English, and the enterprise continues unabated to this day. Sanskrit has the distinction of being the most widely translated Indian language into English. It is upon this foundation that we must build by encouraging translations from the other Indian languages into English. Translated into English, a Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, or Bengali text will have new readers, both at home and abroad. Only then can we say that India has been truly translated.

Since India is the third largest publisher of books in English after the United States and Britain, the largest readership for the translations is obviously within India itself. With the exception of the Sahitya Akademi, no publisher in India is actively engaged in publishing translations either from one Indian language into another or from an Indian language into English.

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Since 1954, the Sahitya Akademi has almost single-handedly sponsored and published translations from every one of the twenty-two Indian languages, including English, that it recognizes. Considering the scope of its operations, its achievement is truly monumental. Regrettably, Indian universities have allowed themselves to fall behind those in the West in this important enterprise.

It is ironic that while every college and university in India has a department of English for the enjoyment and study of the classics of English literature, Indian literature is seen as a poor relation. My hope is that as Indians take more pride in themselves as a people and become more informed and aware of their inheritance as opposed to the nodding acquaintance that they have at present with their classics, the situation is bound to change. There are already some straws in the wind. Many departments of English such as the one at Delhi University, for instance, now include the study of Indian literature in English translation in their curriculum. Both teachers and students in the English departments, who are bilingual in English and an Indian language, have now the opportunity to be actively engaged in translations. An M.Phil. or a Ph.D. degree may be awarded to a fine English translation of a literary text from an Indian language, together with an introduction and notes. Universities should be encouraged to take the lead in this important task if translation as an intellectual activity is to become an integral part of Indian culture. Nothing will bring Indians closer as a people than learning one another's languages. Thus empowered, they will be able to translate India for the benefit of their own people as well as of others interested in India.

Translation is the most intense form of reading. To interpret his text to his audience, the translator must study the culture that has produced the text and study it diligently and for a long time, so that he knows what the Sanskrit word *moksa* means (the word lacks an English equivalent), or what a bo-tree (*Ficus religiosa*), under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, looks like.

Translating from an Indian Language into English

Drawing upon my translations from the Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, and Urdu, I would like to talk about my experience of "Translating India." In the process, I will be talking briefly about these languages and about the problems I encountered in making poets from these languages speak in English.

Translation samples that I will discuss are taken from the Tamil

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Kuruntokai [An Anthology of Short Poems, 2nd c. BCE-3rd c. CE] and *Purananuru* [Four Hundred Heroic Songs, 1st-3rd c. CE]; the Sanskrit *Amarusataka* [Amaru's One Hundred Poems, 7th c. CE]; the Pali *Therigatha* [The Songs of the Elder Nuns, 5th c. BCE]; the Hindi *Mirabai ki Padavali* [Mirabai's Songbook, 16th c.]; and the Urdu *Divan-e Ghalib* [The Collected Poems of Ghalib, 19th c.]. I will examine some problems of idiom, syntax, imagery, and tone encountered in the course of making English poems from the Indian languages. I will leave out technical discussions of meter as they are far too complex for the purposes of this lecture. I will also talk about the differences in the poetics of the Indian languages, on the one hand, and of English, on the other, and examine the implications those differences have for the translations.

Tamil

Tamil is the oldest of the four major Dravidian languages, and it is spoken mainly in Tamil Nadu in southeastern India. The language was regularized around 250 BCE. Tamil is an agglutinative language like Finnish, Hungarian, Japanese, and Turkish. Such languages form their derivatives by a process of fusion. Suffixes, themselves meaningful elements, are added to a noun or verb to inflect its meaning.

Turning to syntax, we find that the normal order of words in an English sentence is SVO (subject + verb + object). In Tamil and other Dravidian languages, the word order is SOV (subject + object + verb): *nan puttakam patitten* ("I a book read" instead of "I read a book"). Of course, such a construction is not unusual in English; it occurs in poetry as an inversion: "For thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth brings" (Shakespeare, "Sonnet 29"). The inversion of the normal order of words (anastrophe) is a rhetorical device used for dramatic effect. The verb in Tamil is usually in the final position. What are the implications, then, for translation into a non-OV language such as English? The inverted word order has to be normalized in English.

Let us look at a poem, "A Trail of Foam," by Kalporu Cirunuraiyar from the *Kuruntokai*, comprising 401 short poems of four to nine lines each and compiled by one Purikko. Tamil poets are often known by their metaphors. We know this poet only by his pseudonym: "The Poet of the Trail of Foam on the Rocks." The titles for the translated poems are my own.

> What do they know about love,
> the folks that tell me to endure its torments?

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Does their strength make them speak so?
It would break my heart
not to be able to lay eyes upon my lover.
Like the high waves that leave behind a trail of foam
as they spend themselves on the rocks,
minute by minute I too waste away.

kaman tankumati yenpor tamak
tariyalar kollo vanaimatu kaiyarkol
yamen katalark kane mayir
cerituni perukiya nencamotu perunirk
kalporu cirunurai pola
mella mella villa kutume

A woman pines for her lover who is away. When her folks try to console her, she is furious. She alone knows what it is to be lovesick, and it breaks her heart. Unable to explain her condition fully, she lapses into a traditional image of high waves spending themselves on the rocks, leaving behind only a trail of foam. The image says it all. Her life too slows down to a trickle, though once it had overflowed with love. The alliteration of "m" and "l" sounds in the last line of the Tamil poem hints at elemental passions beyond the reach of language. The image takes the poem to a new level of expressiveness, unavailable earlier, by concretizing the speaker's feelings. It functions as a parallel text. The image comes naturally to the poet as the ancient Tamils lived in harmony with their surroundings. "High waves" spending themselves on the rocks represent, on the one hand, the violent aspect of water that devours everything in its path and, on the other, uncontrolled powers. Tormented by love, the speaker has lost control of herself; her life hangs by a thread. Life without her lover is unthinkable. It is this realization that makes the final line so poignant: *"mella mella villa kutume"* (literally, "slowly, slowly, I become nothing").

The ancient Tamil poets composed for recitation. It is important to keep the auditory dimension of the poem in mind while translating. And that is precisely what I have tried to do in my translation where the last line, "minute by minute I too waste away," mimics the auditory and emotional overtones of the last line of the original, *"mella mella villa kutume,"* that really tugs at the listener's heartstrings. Underneath the English translation, the Tamil poem is heard loud and clear.

I do not translate word for word or even line by line. I begin by reading the poem over and over again till I am immersed in it. Often I commit the poem to memory. That done, I put it away. I then compose the poem in English, checking the translation against the original to make sure that as many elements of the latter have been carried over. For me,

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translating a poem is as much a creative act as writing an original poem. I compose orally and only when most of the poem has taken shape in my head do I put it down on paper. Shaped by the tongue rather than the pen, the poem has an organic feel to it and a life of its own.

I have used free verse with end-stopped and run-on lines to represent the tone of the poem. The Tamil poem of six lines expands to eight lines in English. Such is the inflationary nature of poetic translation. What is my rationale for using free verse? Reproducing Tamil prosody in English or finding a corresponding meter is a futile task that is likely to do violence to the form of the original. Free verse, on the other hand, allows the translator freedom to be inventive and arrive at a form that is just right for the translation. What is important is to convey the underlying rhythms common to both languages— rhythms that are made available by the sound patterns, such as alliteration, which can echo traditional meters. It is almost as if the translator takes us through the entire poem with a blindfold on, and at the end of the poem he removes the blindfold and allows us to see the true form of the poem.

Sanskrit

The word "Sanskrit" means "perfected" or "refined." The language was standardized from the spoken language by about 500 BCE. It is an inflecting language like Greek and Latin, that is, a word is inflected by adding affixes or by different types of internal change. It has, for instance, eight distinct cases, whereas English has case only marginally. Inflection allows the word order to be varied endlessly. Unaccented function words in English such as "a," "the," "of," and "from" are denoted in Sanskrit by a change in the inflectional syllable. Thus, for the three English words, "of the book," Sanskrit has only one, "*pustakasya*," where the genitive singular marker "*asya*" represents "of the." Thus inflection allows an unusually concise structure.

Sanskrit poetics emphasizes imagery and tone. Nothing is explicitly stated; it is always suggested. Indirect suggestion (*dhvani*) is a fundamental aesthetic principle. The poems are impersonal. No names are mentioned, as any public acknowledgment would be socially disapproved and in bad taste. The form of the poem is an independent stanza of two or four lines (*muktaka*), expressing a single mood (*rasa*). Often the stanza consists of a single sentence.

Sanskrit erotic poetry is best appreciated if the reader has some familiarity with the conventions of the erotic mood spelled out in such texts as Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* [A Manual on the Art of Love, 3rd c.] or

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Kalyanamalla's *Anangaranga* [The Stage of the Love God, 16th c.]. It has few equals, with the possible exception of the erotic poems in The Greek Anthology compiled in the tenth century by the Byzantine scholar Konstantinus Kephalas. Sanskrit poetry was the product of a sophisticated urban civilization.

Let us look at an anonymous poem, "The Sheets," from the *Amarusataka* [Amaru's One Hundred Poems, 7th c.], an influential anthology of erotic verse.

> Smudged here with betel juice, burnished there
> with aloe paste, a splash of powder in one corner,
> and lacquer from footprints embroidered in another,
> with flowers from her hair strewn all over
> its winding crumpled folds, the sheets celebrate
> the joy of making love to a woman in every position.
>
> *kvacittambulaktah kvacidagarupankankamalinah*
> *kvaciccurnodgari kvaccidapi ca salakttakapadah |*
> *valibhangabhogairalakapatitaih sirnakusumaih*
> *striya nanavastham prathayati ratam pracchadapatah| |*

The word "sheets" has long been part of the euphemisms for lovemaking. Expressions include "shaking of the sheets," "between the sheets," and "possess a woman's sheets." Social conventions, however, prohibit the poet from describing the various positions. He gets around the prohibition by describing the traces left by the woman, who was probably a courtesan, on the bedsheets during lovemaking. The telltale marks on the bedsheets–"betel juice," "aloe paste," "splash of powder," "lacquer from footprints," and "flowers/ from her hair"—bear witness to a night of wild lovemaking by the couple. By concentrating almost entirely on the background, the poet forces the reader's attention on the foreground—the couple's lovemaking in "every position." In his *Srngaradipika* [The Interpretation of Love, ca. 1400], one of four commentaries on the *Amarusataka,* Vemabhupala identifies each of the telltale marks with a specific position: the "betel juice" with the "position of the cat;" the "aloe paste" with the "position of the elephant;" the "splash of powder" with the "position of the cow;" and "lacquer from footprints" with the unorthodox position, the woman on top of the man. The *Kamasutra* (part 2, chapters 6 and 8) offers the classic description of these positions. The poem is a textbook example of the Sanskrit poet's use of indirect suggestion *(dhvani).* Each reader, however, completes the poem in his or her own mind.

The poem is a feast of olfactory delights. It recognizes the erotic

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possibilities of scents such as aromatic herbs and perfumes in lovemaking. Other cultures are equally explicit on this matter. Proverbs 7:17-18 says: "I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning; let us solace ourselves with loves."

The sense of total abandon with which the couple made love all over the bed is brought home by the insistent repetition of the adverb "here" *("kvacit")*. The entire poem is one sentence wherein the subject "the sheets" *(pracchadapatah)* is deliberately withheld till the very end to add to the suspense. The poem is an erotic masterpiece.

In the translation, the four lines of Sanskrit have expanded to seven lines in English that vary in length from nine to sixteen syllables. The classical meter is replaced by free verse. The rhythms are those of speech, not song. This is no doubt an impoverishment, but it is almost impossible to reproduce the quantitative meters of Sanskrit in a stress-timed language such as English. The erotic mood of the original has, I believe, come through and so has its delicate tone. The voice of the Sanskrit poet is heard distinctly. Its rhythmic flow is unmistakable and so is its uninhibited celebration of erotic love between a man and a woman.

Again, the translator must bear in mind that Sanskrit was composed to be heard. The ancient Indians did not read with their eyes only but aloud, and it follows that the sound of a classical poem is supremely important and ought not to be disregarded in translation. When composing, the poets had a definite audience in mind, and they composed for performance.

Pali

In contrast to Sanskrit, the "perfected" or "refined" language, there were many vernaculars known as Prakrits, the "original" or "natural" languages. One such Prakrit is Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, the *Tipitaka* [The Three Baskets, 1st c. BCE]. Pali means a "row or series of sacred Buddhist texts," as opposed to commentary. It is a form of the ancient Paisachi language spoken in western India. In the first centuries after his death, the Buddha's sermons in Magadhi were translated into Paisachi, which later developed into Pali. Unlike Hindus, Buddhists had no qualms about translation. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to spread his teachings in their own dialects. Pali is still the religious language of the Theravada Buddhists of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia.

Let us look at an example, "Song of a Former Courtesan" by Vimala, from *The Songs of the Elder Nuns* (5th c. BCE), said to have been composed during the lifetime of the Buddha (ca. 563-ca. 483 BCE).

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Young and overbearing—
drunk with fame, beauty,
with my figure, its flawless appearance—
I despised other women.

Heavily made-up, I leaned
against the brothel door
and flashed my wares. Like a hunter,
I laid my snares to surprise fools.

I even taught them a trick or two
as I slipped my clothes off
and bared my secret places.
O how I despised them!

Today, head shaved, wrapped
in a single robe, an almswoman,
I move about or sit at the foot
of a tree, empty of all thoughts.

All ties to heaven and earth
I have cut loose forever.
Uprooting every obsession,
I have put out the fires.

matta vannena rupena sobhaggena yasena ca |
yobbanena c' upatthaddha anna samatimanni 'ham || 72 ||
vibhusetva imam kayam sucittam balalapanam |
atthasim vesidvaramhi luddo pasam iv' oddiya || 73 ||
pilandhanam vidamsenti guyham pakasikam bahum |
akasim vividham mayam ujjagghanti bahum janam || 74 ||
sajja pindam caritvana munda samghatiparuta |
nisinna rukkhamulamhi avitakkassa labhini || 75 ||
sabbe yoga samucchinna ye dibba ye ca manusa |
khepetva asave sabbe sitibhuta mhi nibbuta || 76 ||

Each stanza (*sloka*) comprises four hemistichs (*padas*) of eight syllables each. The first two hemistichs, divided by a caesura, form one line; the next two hemistichs, again divided by a caesura, form the second line. The Pali Buddhist poets replaced the profane language of the secular poets of Tamil and Sanskrit with a sacred one. They abandoned the love poetry of the secular poets and replaced it with the attainment of liberation (*moksa*), the perfect bliss that every Buddhist monk or nun sought after. This is entirely in keeping with the teachings of the Buddha. The first of the Buddha's Four

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Noble Truths is suffering (*dukkha*), and the cause of suffering is desire (*kama*), especially sexual desire. One description of nirvana is the dying out of the fires of desire (*kama*), greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*).

Vimala, the former courtesan of Vesali, after her initiation into the Buddhist order of nuns, realizes the impermanence of all things and is on her way to enlightenment. Vesali is one of the eight holy places for Buddhists, for it was here that the Buddha preached his last sermon. Composed a hundred years after Sappho (6th c. BCE), Vimala's poem is an extraordinary spiritual testament unlike anything in the Lesbian poet. The song is a chant, and there is no way I could reproduce the prosody of the Pali original. So I settled for a vigorous, colloquial idiom spoken simply but passionately in five quatrains. The Pali word for "obsessions" in the last stanza is *asavas*, "the obsessions of the mind." The struggle for the extinction of these obsessions is one of our primary duties. In his *Paramatthadipani* [The Revelation of the Highest Truth, 5th c. CE], which includes a commentary on *The Songs of the Elder Nuns*, Dhammapala of Kancipuram tells the story of Vimala's initiation into the order.

One day Vimala saw Moggallana, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, in the streets of Vesali. Infatuated with him, she followed him to his house. There she turned on the charm and tried to seduce him but was repulsed. Moggallana lashed out at her: "You bag of dung, tied up with skin. You demoness with lumps on your breast. The nine streams in your body flow all the time, are vile-smelling and full of dung. A monk desiring purity avoids your body as one avoids dung." Vimala was speechless. The encounter was a turning point in her life. She renounced her life as a courtesan and became a Buddhist nun. Vimala's spiritual conversion can be explained in terms of the interdependence of the ascetic and the whore in Indian culture, which considers sexual desire an obstacle to enlightenment.

Vimala flaunts her sexuality and is proud of it. Her very identity depends on it. It empowers her to make fools of men for whom she has nothing but contempt. And yet she cannot do without them. Her survival as a courtesan depends on her ability to dispense sexual favors. In the end, she is filled with self-loathing and turns her life around to become a renouncer who has cut loose "All ties to heaven and earth" (17). Free at last, she becomes an *arahat*, the "holy one," the highest stage reached by a Theravada Buddhist.

Hindi-Urdu

Hindi and Urdu are essentially one language with two scripts, Devanagari and Persian-Arabic, respectively. Literary Hindi and Urdu have two vocabu-

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laries, Hindi borrowing words from Sanskrit, and Urdu, from Persian and Arabic. The two languages are rooted in Hindu and Islamic cultures respectively. Hindi was regularized around 1000-1200 CE. Urdu developed in southern India, where it was known as Dakkhini, and eventually traveled north in the eighteenth century to displace Persian as the language of poetry.

Let us look at an example from Hindi, "When Will You Come, Beloved?" by Mirabai (16th c.), one of the favorite saint-poets of northern India, whose compositions have come down to us in Rajasthani, Braj Bhasa, and Gujarati. It is from her *Padavali* [Songbook].

How can I sleep without my Beloved?
Wrenched from his arms how can I survive?
I drown in the flames of love.
Without him my house is dark and unwelcome.

Of what use are lamps in his absence?
Not for me the pleasures of the bed.
I spend my nights sleepless.
Will my Beloved ever come home?

Frogs and peacocks, cuckoos and koels
call out to one another. Lightning thrashes about
in a net of black clouds. Thunder fills me with terror.
In vain I fight back the tears.

Tell me, friends, what shall I do? Where shall I go?
How uproot this pain?
Like a venomous snake, his absence has bitten me:
in wave after wave, my life ebbs away.

Go, bring me the herbs at once.
Who among my friends will return with my Beloved?
You stole her heart, Lord. When will you meet her?
When will you come to talk and laugh with Mira?

ramaiya bin nimd na avai |
nimd na ave virah satave, prem ki amc dhulavai |
bin piya jot mandir amdhiyaro, dipak day na avai |
piya bin meri sej aluni, jagat rain bihavai |
piya kab re ghar avai |
dadur mor papiha bolai, koyal sabad sunavai |
ghumant ghata ular hoi ayi, damin damak daravai |
nain jhar lavai |
kaha karum kit jaum mori sajani, baidan kumn butavai |
birah nagan mori kaya dasi hai, lahr lahr jiv javai |
jadi ghas lavai |

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kohai sakhi saheli sajani, piya kum an milavai |
miram kum prabhu kabare miloge, man mohan mohi bhavai |
kabai hams kar batlavai || 74 ||

The poem is composed in a musical form known as the *pad*, and it is sung to a specific melody type (*rag*). The dominant mood (*ras*) is erotic, and Mira is unrivaled in Hindi literature in her depiction of lovers' separation (*virah*). A devotee of the god Krishna, she speaks here of the effect his absence has upon her. An ominous note is introduced by the rhyming syllable "*avai*" as it rings the changes at the end of each line. As a word on its own, *avai* means "to come." The poem trembles with the expectation of Krishna's coming. It is a fine example of *bhakti* or devotion to a personal god. The word *bhakti* comes from *bhaj*, "to adore, share, worship." A compassionate God invites his devotees to share in his divinity if they surrender themselves to Him in love. The devotional poem is characterized by the use of the vernacular in preference to Sanskrit, the literary language. The devotional poets spoke to ordinary, illiterate people who believed that salvation could be attained by devotion to God without the mediation of the Brahman priesthood. A second characteristic of the devotional poem is the signature line (*bhanita*), usually at the the end of the poem, where the poet identifies herself by name.

I have tried to preserve the musical form by rearranging Mira's song in five quatrains that exploit elements such as rhetorical questions ("How can I sleep without my Beloved?"), inversions ("Without him my house is dark and unwelcome"), and consonantal and vocalic assonances ("Frogs and peacocks, cuckoos and koels") that reinforce and dramatize a moment of extreme tension— separation from one's beloved. The poem is a textbook example of *viraha-bhakti*, the devotee's agony at being separated from God.

Both Mira and Ghalib are hugely popular in the subcontinent thanks to Bollywood. Their poems have been set to music by composers and sung by countless singers, including Lata Mangeshkar and Begum Akhtar. Up until the mid-twentieth century, poems were composed to be sung, and this practice continues to some extent in Urdu poetry in poets' gatherings known as the *mushaira*.

Finally, let us look at an example from Urdu, "Twilight in Delhi," a ghazal by Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869), the greatest of Urdu poets. It is from his *Collected Poems* (19th c.).

To my eye the pleasures of the world are nothing but dust.
Except for blood, what else flows in the guts?

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Turned to dust, the wings are now a spent force;
they might even blow away on the winds.

Who is this coming towards us with the very face
of heaven, his path strewn with roses, not dust?

I should have been kind to myself, even if she wasn't.
How I have wasted my breath for nothing!

The mere thought of spring makes them drunk,
but the tavern walls and doors had no part in it.

I am ashamed of the violence of my own love.
In this ruined house, how I had hoped to be a builder!

Today our verses, Asad, are only an idle pastime.
What's the use of flaunting our talent, then?

maze jahan ke apni nazar mem khak nahim
sivae khun-e jigar so jigar mem khak nahim

magar gubar hue par, hava uda le jae
vagarna tab-o-tavam bal-o-par mem khak nahim

yah kis bahist simayal ki amad amad hai
ki gair-e-jalva-e-gul rahguzar mem khak nahim

bhala use na sahi kuchh mujhi ki rahm ata
asar mere nafas-e be-asar mem khak nahim

khayal-e-jalva-e-gul se kharab haim maikas
sarabkhane ke divar-o-dar mem khak nahim

hua hum isq ki garatgari se sarminda
sivae hasrat-e-tamir, ghar mem khak nahim

hamare ser haim ab sirf dillagi ke "asad"
khula ki, fayda arz-e-hunar mem khak nahim

The ghazal (< Ar. *gazal*, to talk of women) originated in the pre-Islamic poetry of Arabia in which the poet talked about his beloved's charms. It came into its own as a genre only in the seventh century CE when it was often set to music and sung before an audience either by the poet himself or by a professional reciter called the *rawi*. The conception of love was idealistic and often sensual. A favorite topos was illicit love that was often unrequited.

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The ghazal usually comprises five or more loosely related couplets (*shi'rs*). Each couplet is self-contained and independent of the other couplets. There is no maximum limit. Love may be the theme of one couplet and war, of another. The couplets are, however, formally linked by meter and rhyme. The meters are of Arabic origin. The ghazal is primarily composed for recitation at a gathering of poets. It is usual to represent an Urdu poet by only the finest couplets from his ghazals. However, I have translated the entire ghazal here.

Ghalib lived in one of the most turbulent eras of Indian history. He was an eyewitness to the Revolt of 1857 when Indians attempted to end British rule. The British suppressed the revolt and took reprisals. Ghalib recoiled with horror from the brutality and mourned in one ghazal after another the end of the world as he knew it. He was the keeper of the nation's conscience at a critical juncture in its history. He was essentially an elegiac poet. His elegy laments the collapse of both Delhi and the Mughal empire (1526-1858) and questions the relevance of writing poetry in a time of national upheaval. As a poet, Ghalib bears witness to the truth that foreign occupation is always immoral, for it robs the people of their self-esteem and pride as a nation and makes them ineffectual. The speaker in Ghalib's poem is suspicious of the British presence.

There are no indications of the dawn of a new age. Still, people continue to hope for the impossible, that is, the British will soon go away. There is no greater sign of total national inertia than living on such false hopes. Ghalib juxtaposes the national failure to stop the British from taking over and his personal failure to condemn the occupation. He had not rallied to the defense of his king and country. On the contrary, he presided over the demise of the nation, though he had hoped to be among its makers. The aftertaste of shame rankles in his heart. Under the circumstances, he even questions the power of poetry to effect lasting changes: "Today our verses, Asad, are only an idle pastime./ What's the use of flaunting our talent, then" (13-15)?

Ghalib's elegy is prophetic. Though it speaks of the loss of empire following the Revolt of 1857, it can also speak to the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Ghalib foresaw that "A house divided against itself cannot stand," a Biblical expression that Abraham Lincoln first made famous in 1858 in a speech in Springfield, Illinois. And this painful reality continues to haunt present-day India. It is this ominous, prophetic tone that I have tried to convey in my translation by internalizing the situation in the ghazal, where each couplet falls on the ear as a call to action to preserve national unity. Each couplet in the original is self-contained and is conveyed with the force of an epigram, which makes it easier for the couplet to be remembered and quoted. I have done the same in my translation.

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My translations from the Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, and Urdu have fed back into my own poetry, helping to deepen the resonance and tone of my poems. I have tried to catch the spirit of Ghalib's times in a poetic sequence of my own, titled "A House Divided." Here is section 2 of the poem, "Homage to Shaikh Ibrahim Zauq," a dramatic monologue by Ghalib's great contemporary, Zauq (1789-1854), poet laureate to the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar (r. 1837-57).

Time rests his hand on your shoulder.
Old, you look every illusion in the face.

Your fingers are stiff: you can't write even two lines.
Letters come in from all sides; you lay them aside.

The hands that wrote them return at leisure
to knock on your inexpectant door at Churiwalan.

The days collapse on the pile. The present
is troubled to distraction; there is no respite:

you turn a page—the book lies open—
or remember drowning yourself in the arms of that slut,

Zohra Jan, in an effort to blunt the pain.
"Who would leave," you ask, "Delhi and its lanes?"

The Angrez impudently rub salt in your wounds:
your pride bites the dust; still pullulate

the decrepit ruins. Blood trickles down the Jumna now
while the Emperor flies indecisive kites,

or mourns in verse his discomfiture.
Listen, Zauq, after you who is left to speak of Delhi?

Translation as Empowerment

I began this lecture by speaking of the role of translation in a nation-state such as India, whose very survival depends upon it. It is my belief that a nation renews itself through translation. If it is indifferent to it, it is in danger of "falling off the globe." The United Nations Development Programme's *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, prepared by a group of Arab intellec-

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tuals, offers some telling data on translation and nation-building. The entire Arab world, comprising twenty-two states with a population of 280 million, for instance, translates "about 300 books annually," which is "one fifth the number that Greece alone," with a population of ten million, "translates." Further, "The cumulative total of translated books since the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun's (r. 813-33) time is about 100,000, which is almost the number that Spain translates in one year." Translation is the oxygen that keeps a language alive. Without it, the language would become stale, and its air, unbreathable.

Translation therefore plays a seminal role in making available to readers of one language the writings of another language. It helps to build a bridge between cultures by promoting understanding and reducing mistrust, thus enabling us to regard the world as our neighborhood. The imperative to know oneself should also include knowledge of our neighbors. Translation provides us with the opportunity. Let's not blow it.

Notes

2 *uta tvah . . . srnotyenam.* Rig Veda 10.71.4, *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche Ubersetzt*, 4 vols., Harvard Oriental Series 33-36, ed. and trans. Karl Friedrich Geldner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1951-57).
French. Rig-Véda ou Livre des hymnes, 4 vols., ed. and trans. Alexandre Langlois (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1848-51).
English. Rig-veda-Sanhita: A Collection of Ancient Hindu Hymns, 6 vols., trans. Horace Hayman Wilson (London: Trübner and Co., 1850-88).
German. Rig-veda, 2 vols., trans. Hermann Grassmann (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1876-77).

3 *As a complete world . . . universe.* Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 7.
I have no . . . Arabia. *Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education,"* Selected Writings, *ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972) 241.*

5 *For thy sweet love . . . brings.* Shakespeare, "Sonnet 29." *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1977) 27-28.

6 *kaman . . . kutume.* Kalporu Cirunuraiyar, "*Kuruntokai* 290." *Kuruntokai*, ed. U. Ve. Caminataiyar (Chennai: Sri Tiyakaraca vilaca veliyitu, 1962) 539-40.

8 kvacittambulaktah . . . pracchadapatah. *Anon,* "Amarusatakam *65.*" Amarusatakam, with the commentary Srngaradipika of Vemabhupala, *ed. and trans. Chintaman Ramachandra Devadhar (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984) 79.*
Vemabhupala. Devadhar 80.

9 I have perfumed . . . with loves. *Proverbs 7:17-18.* The Bible: Authorized King James Version, *ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 728.*

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10 *matta vannena . . . nibbuta. Thera- and Theri-Gatha: Stanzas Ascribed to Elders of the Buddhist Order of Recluses*, 2d ed., ed. Hermann Oldenburg and Richard Pischel, Pali Text Society (London: Luzac, 1966) 131.

11 *You bag . . . avoids dung. The Elders' Verses II [Theragatha]*, trans. K. R. Norman, Pali Text Society (London: Luzac, 1966) 106.

12 *ramaiya bin . . . batlavai*. Mirabai, *Mirabai ki padavali* [Mirabai's Songbook], 13th printing, ed. Acarya Parasuram Caturvedi (Allahabad: Hindi sahitya sammelan, 1966) 121-22.

14 *magar gubar . . . arz-e-hunar mem khak nahim*. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *Divan-e Ghalib* [The Collected Poems of Ghalib], 2d ed., ed. Imtiyaz Ali Khan Arshi (New Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1982).

16 *Time rests . . . Delhi?* R. Parthasarathy, "A House Divided 2." *A House Divided: Poems*. (Typescript, 2003) 84-85.

17 *The entire Arab world . . . in one year*. Qtd. in Thomas L. Friedman, "Arabs at the Crossroads," *The New York Times* (3 July 2002): A23, an op-ed on the "Arab Human Development Report 2002," United Nations Development Program, Regional Bureau for Arab States.

This is the text of the 2002-2003 Edwin M. Moseley Lecture delivered on February 12, 2003 at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, where R. Parthasarathy teaches. His translation of the Old Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikaram*, published by Columbia University Press in 1993, was awarded the 1996 Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize (English). Diacritical marks are omitted.

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Translation as Hoax: Art, Othering and Life Writing

P P Raveendran

In this essay we focus on three works in Malayalam: Sahitya Akademi award-winnig novelist's Anand's novel *Vyasanum Vighneswaranum* and two pieces of life writing, the first an account of her personal life by the well known social activist and tribal leader C K Janu and the other the autobiography of AMN Chakiar, a little known retired public servant, who in his early life had to suffer social ostracism for no fault of his. All three works have their Malayalam and English versions: in fact Chakiar's autobiography was first written in English before its Malayalam translation appeared. I use Anand's novel *Vysanum Vighneswaranum* (1996; trans. *Vyasa and Vighneshwara*, 2000) as a framing text that will allow me to make certain general statements about the act of translation in relation to the processes of othering, while CK Janu's *Janu: CK Januvinte Jeevitakatha* (2002; trans. *Mother Forest: the Unfinished Story of CK Janu*, 2004) and AMN Chakiar's *The Last Smarta Vicharam* (1998; trans. *Avasanatte Smarta Vicharam*, 2002) are used to examine the validity of these observations in concrete situations.[1]

I use the term "translation" here as a trope to discuss the relation between texts that are "translated," carried across, from one contextual location to another rather than as a term that refers to the actual act of textual transfer involving two natural languages. Certainly, all the texts that I look at have their discrete versions in two languages, but for me what

1. The publication details of the English versions of these texts are: Anand, *Vyasa and Vighneshwara*, trans. Saji Mathew (New Delhi: Katha, 2000); CK Janu, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of CK Janu*, as told to and written by Bhaskaran, trans. N Ravi Shankar (New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004); AMN Chakiar, *The Last Smarta Vicharam* (Tripunithura: Padma C Menon, 1998). All quotations are from the above editions of the texts.

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is more important is the relation of each text to what can loosely be called a pre-narrative location, its pre-history that covers an inter-textual mesh of myths, ideas, images, impressions and representations that ultimately get an identity and shape in the process of narrativization. How this inter-text gets translated into the printed text in the first place is what interests me more in this chapter than its literal translation into another language. The question of "othering" is central to all three works, as it is the dominant society's other that forms the theme of Anand's and Janu's works, while the process of othering of a different kind is what Chakiar's autobiography is all about. How the question of the other is addressed in the act of narrativization and the subsequent translation of the texts into the second language will be of further interest.

Anand's novel is somewhat different from the other two works examined here in that *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* is presented primarily as a story that interrogates the processes of authentication involved in the representation of story as history. Inasmuch as Janu's and Chakiar's narratives can be treated as cultural negotiations in the interface between story and history-sociology-biography, what Anand does through his novel is to creatively explore the facets of this negotiation, reconstructing in the process what Romila Thapar has called "the moments in the biography of a narrative."[2] Indeed, there is a sense in which all three works can be treated as historical discourses that have sought to reconstruct the past from diverse perspectives. Here while Anand's novel reconstructs the mythic past of the *Mahabharata* story from a fictional and somewhat theoretical perspective, Janu and Chakiar, in their own independent ways, reconstruct the events of their "personal" lives from analytical and seemingly objective perspectives.

Of the three works, Anand's two-part novel, especially its first part where the story of the fabrication of a new purana called *Nishadapurana* is introduced, will be of interest to us in building up some of the arguments of this essay. These arguments concern both the question of othering implicated in inventing an extension for the Ekalavya story in the *Mahabharata* and the problematization of the act of cultural negotiation occasioned by the translation of the story into modern narratives. It is true that Anand's novel cannot be treated as a conventional reading of the *Mahabharata* story comparable to such works PK Balakrishnan's *Eni Jnan Urangatte* and MT Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*, discussed in the last chapter. Though the first section, "Kriti," of Anand's novel is a take-off on the *Mahabharata* story in certain respects, no one would be prepared to count it as an example

2. Romila Thapar, *Narratives and the Making of History: Two Lectures* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) 4.

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of the epic's fictional reconstruction. There is no translation of the spirit of the "original" epic in Anand. Indeed there is an air of casualness about the way in which the author looks upon the great epic. Rather than focussing on the spirit of the epic, the writer is more interested in the letter of the original, what we called the inter-textual complex of its discursive geography. Dharmadhikari in Anand's novel is referring to this aspect of the epic when he provides an idiosyncratic etymology for the word "purana" as suggested by his putative friend Sadashiv Joshi:

> Child, do you know the root form of the word purana? It is purana – pura, ancient, and nava, new, at the same time. We can argue endlessly whether the *Mahabharata* is an amalgamation of plots taken from the puranas or whether the puranas are imaginatively elaborated compositions of stories taken from the *Mahabharata*. In any case, one thing is certain. The puranas are replete with the most succulent imagination.[3]

It is Anand's recognition of this epic aspect that allows him to invent the new purana of *Nishadapurana* that does not come under the purview of the canon of the eighteen puranas and upapuranas. It was erudite Sadashiv Joshi, so we are told, who first spoke of the existence of a purana that dealt with Ekalavya's encounter with Abhimanyu and the lengthy dialogue between the two on the question of Vidya in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Joshi himself could not recall the exact title of this purana, whose existence is not fully endorsed by Dharmadhikari. The narrator too appears to be rather skeptical about Joshi's claim till he stumbles upon a worn out copy of *Nishadapurana* among a set of misplaced books in the Central Secretariat Library at Ramakrishnapuram, Delhi. Though the entire episode is revealed as a hoax later on, the narration is carried out in such a way as to sow the seeds of suspicion in the mind of the reader: can it be true/won't it be false? In fact Anand's story is talking about the evasive nature of the spirit of all original epics. Dharmadhikari is pointing to the inter-textual nature of epic narration when he admits that the story regarding *Nishadapurana* was a concoction of his own imagination. He asks: "Do we ever care to investigate the percentage of truth and imagination in the puranas and literature we read? Again, questions like what exists and what does not, or what is possible and what is not, do not have that much significance as far as they are concerned."[4] The narrator of Anand's story is making a significant point when he closes Part One of the novel with the statement that the story of *Nishadapurana* is best left incomplete. The fragments of the purana are for posterity, who will not merely read those incomplete pages, but will indeed write them.[5]

3. Anand, *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* 23.
4. *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* 49.
5. *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* 53.

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Anand raises the question of othering at work in the *Mahabharata* by suggesting that there are only scant references to the Ekalavya story in the epic. Ekalavya according to him was the first epic character who was forced to make a choice between Vidya (skill) and freedom, and he chose freedom by sacrificing his thumb that for him represented his skill in archery. Ekalavya has his latter-day counterparts in the silk-winding weavers of Bengal, who chopped off their thumbs in the imperial days as a mark of protest against the oppressive trading policies of the British government in India. Ekalavya embodies and anticipates the other of all times and of all countries, yet the epic *Mahabharata* "makes only a mechanical and passing reference" to the plight of this character.[6] After the main story in the *Adiparva*, barring a couple of mute and oblique references, there is no extended treatment of the Ekalavya story in the rest of the *Mahabharata*.

Anand, who in his non-fictional writings in Malayalam has always expressed his solidarity with the othered and the underprivileged, compensates for the epic neglect of Ekalavya by conceiving *Nishadapurana* as an apocryphal work that re-enacts the story of Ekalavya by giving the character a re-birth in Kurukshetra. The details of this purana are not revealed fully in the text of Anand's novel. In typical metafictional fashion, they are held back not only from the reader but from the narrator as well. Though these missing details are sufficient to engage the attention of the readers of Anand, what interests us here is the trope of translation that can be read into the cultural negotiation that the author alludes to through this story. *Nishadapurana*, as it turns out at the end of Part One of Anand's novel, was a hoax, a concoction of Dharmadhikari's fertile imagination. So was Sadashiv Joshi, the scholar friend who was supposed to have provided Dharmadhikari with a clue to the existence of the new purana. The novel here becomes a sort of allegory, an allegory that carries within itself a hidden commentary on the act of translation.

It is Anand's characterization of his narrative as a hoax that leads us to this kind of a reading. Translation, as translation theorists are never tired of repeating, is a symbolic exchange that ironically leads to distortion and falsification of the original. There is a well-known Italian proverb equating the translator to a traitor. The translator's treachery operates through language or, to be a little more precise, through discourse, that is, through thought in social praxis. What happens here is that the translation often brings the original under its thrall, giving the latter the status merely of an object proposition subjected to the overweening gaze of the translation. Michel Foucault has, while explaining rhetorical paradoxes involved in such asser-

6. *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* 19.

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tions as "I lie, I speak," called attention to the need for making "a distinction between two propositions, the first of which is the object of the second." According to him, "the grammatical configuration of the paradox cannot suppress this essential duality, try as it might to dodge it. . . . Every proposition must be of a higher 'type' than that which serves as its object."[7] Anand's novel is communicating the same message, even as it provides us with an alternative model of translation that perhaps does not treat the "original" as an object to be subjected to the translation's gaze.

We'll presently see how precisely it is that *Vyasa and Vighneshwara* provides this alternative model. But before that let us examine how the autobiographies of Janu and Chakiar locate themselves in this problematic. Inasmuch as Janu's and Chakiar's works are subject propositions that cast their overweening gaze on a discourse that other people – and they themselves – are inclined to consider as accounts of the respective writer's past, the two pieces of life writing could be treated as "translations" of their authentically lived realities and experiences. Chakiar, of course, does not have any doubt about the veracity of what he is recounting. The traumatic experiences that he underwent while he was a young boy are tucked away safely in his memory, he thinks, and it is no hard task for him to retrieve them intact after a passage of eighty or so years, inscribed as they are in the English language that he studied so systematically in school. Janu does not have much of a formal schooling, but in the case of her autobiography the matter is complicated by the fact that her work, both in English translation and in the Malayalam original, is presented as having been "told to and written by" Bhaskaran, the well-known cartoonist and illustrator. The implicit assumption of both works seems to be that the self in the past or the past in the self is an unmediated territory that one is free to visit at one's pleasure and that one will come back from it with a treasure trove of experiences kept concealed there that can later be translated into auto/biography with no fear of being contradicted or contested.

Though this simplistic position on biography and autobiography was shared by theorists of the two genres in the past, in the context of the kind of debates that contemporary theory has witnessed on such questions as the discursive distinction between fact and fiction, the constitution of subjectivity in auto/biography, the truth status of the claims made by the auto/biographer and the overall generic specificity of auto/biography, one might find it difficult to accept the position that the self in the past is an uncontested subject. This indeed is not a purely theoretical debate. Some-

7. Michel Foucault, "The Thought of the Outside" (1966), *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, Volume 2 of the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000) 147.

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times people, including writers, can feel deeply mortified by the images that fellow writers create of them in the name of auto/biography. Ted Hughes's comment about Jacqueline Rose's biography of his deceased wife Sylvia Plath (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*) is not untypical: "Miss Rose thought she was writing a book about a writer dead thirty years and seems to have overlooked, as I say, the plain fact that she has ended up writing a book largely about me."[8] Complaints of this kind are not uncommon. So is the criticism that in the effort to write the biography of another person, one has ended up writing about oneself.

To write about oneself in the process of writing the biography of another: this is a familiar situation that the theorists of auto/biography have discussed at length in the last century, especially after the proponents of the "new biography" like Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey placed it centrally on the agenda of critical debate concerning life writing.[9] Biographers, as many of these theorists recognized, will neither be neutral nor objective, but will often have what psychoanalysts call a "transferential" relationship with their object of narration, so that a biographer in another sense could be described as narrating his/her own life story. One might reverse this formula and suggest that an autobiographer might with equal legitimacy be thought of as writing the biography of another person. Barbara Johnson has remarked that there are at least two people competing for control over the story of a life, the biographer and the subject. The remark is true of autobiography too where, according to Johnson, the contest is between "the retrospectively narrating self and the person now gone, who once lived."[10] In the case of CK Janu's autobiography, one might say there are not two, but three people in contest: the autobiographer Janu, her former self that is the subject, and ubiquitous Bhaskaran, who like Malcolm X's Alex Haley, helps Janu improvise a personal narrative that draws, needless to say, on her memory, on both its virtues and failings.[11] One might mention a fourth contestant in the English translation in the form of the translator N Ravi Shanker who, as his note prefacing the translation suggests, had been

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8. Ted Hughes quoted as epigraph in Barbara Johnson, "Introduction," *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1996) 119.
9. For an account of the tenets of the "new biography" see Laura Marcus, *Autobiographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) chapter 3.
10. Barbara Johnson, "Introduction," *Seductions of Auto/biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff, 119.
11. See Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

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associated with the narrative project right from its original conception. We are clueless as to the intention of Bhaskaran in making Janu open her past to him.[12] The whole exercise appears to have been planned meticulously by far-sighted Bhaskaran, to go by the evidence provided by Ravi Shanker in the translator's note. "Exactly two years back, when Bhaskaran invited me to go with him on a trip to Wayanad to meet Janu, I didn't know it would be the beginning of a book of this kind," writes the translator.[13] Bhaskaran had taken care to carry with him the future translator of his projected auto/biography of Janu. One might say it is a case of the original carrying its afterlife, the translation, within itself. The intention in question can certainly be related to Bhaskaran's interest in the tribal question, but it can also be connected to Janu's newly acquired status as a celebrity in middle class Kerala, especially after she organized in 2001 a 47-day sit-in strike of the Adivasis in front of the Kerala Secretariat demanding restoration of alienated land to the tribals. The strike could generate wide-spread public sympathy in favour of the tribal cause and this was repeated in the Muthanga incident of a year later, in which attempts to reclaim alienated land by the tribals of Wayanad were ruthlessly suppressed by the state administration.[14] The incident had received national attention primarily because it was widely perceived as an agitation for the right to live launched by a section of the society's under-privileged in the state of Kerala that often prided itself in its somewhat equitable model of social development. The fact that the agitation was led by charismatic Janu, the first woman leader to emerge from the ranks of the tribal movement in its history, was another factor that worked in its favour.

The narrativization of Janu's life, then, cannot be extricated from the context in which it has been narrativized. The English translation of the text only helps to further fortify this context. This is an important observation to make because it reminds us that Janu's retrospectively narrating self is

12. Intention, incidentally, is a pervasive concept in the theories of auto/biography. Autobiographical intention is not to be confused with the principle of authorial intention rejected by contemporary criticism. Autobiographical critics generally present intention as a condition of "truth." Roy Pascal's formulation of this idea can be read as typical: "The first condition is the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and the intention in his writing." *Design and Truth in Autobiographical Writing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 60.
13. N. Ravi Shanker, "Translator's Note," in CK Janu, *Mother Forest* ix.
14. The Muthanga incident of course took place after the publication of the Malayalam version of *Janu*. But the reception of the book in Malayalam took place to some extent in the context of this incident.

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a product of this context, which casts a glance on her former selves that are "now gone," that "once lived." This context, although it also contains elements of radical public opinion, has been constituted largely by what Janu calls "civil society,"[15] by which she means the non-tribal segments in the social formation and not the general public lacking in political power. Janu's perspective here is certainly that of a member of a tribal group who looks upon outsiders with feelings of fear and suspicion. The history of the tribals of Wayanad, who were subjected to centuries of oppression and exploitation first by local non-tribal landlords and then by migrant encroachers from southern Kerala after the First World War, would only justify these feelings. Janu says: "the *jenmi* [i.e. the landlord] only took over our lands. but the Migrants took over our men too and made them toil. they would acquire all the good land on the hill sides on flimsy grounds, most of our people had given away lands for a bottle of *arrack* or some good tobacco or a sari."[16] With this history of prolonged exploitation, the tribals, according to Janu, were scared of everyone. They were afraid of the *jenmi*, their only provider of work, as well as his assistants sent to supervise work in the field. This is what she says: "in those days we were afraid of almost everything. the backs of our people seem to be so bent because they have been terrified of so many things for generations. when our people speak they don't raise their eyes and that must be because they are so scared. . . ."[17]

While it is this fear and suspicion of the non-tribal communities that Janu really expresses when she passes strictures on the dominant and land-owning classes in Wayanad, one might wonder whether her use of coinages like "civil society" that has other connotations isn't somewhat misleading. Bhaskaran in his short introductory note to the English edition of Janu's autobiography briefly mentions the circumstances that imposed on her the

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15. The term in the Malayalam original is "potusamooham," which literally means "general society" or the "social mainstream." To be theoretically precise, "civil society" is a concept that Antonio Gramsci used in order to elaborate his idea of hegemony. In Gramsci's conception, civil society that includes the school, the family, the church, the media and the like is to be distinguished from the coercive mechanism of the state that includes the army, the police and the administration. According to Gramsci, the ruling class exercises hegemony over a society not through physical force, but through ideological work in civil society.
16. Janu, *Mother Forest* 19. Here and elsewhere in my quotations from Janu, I haven't modified the spelling or punctuation in the translation. The translator has explained his position on these in his prefatory note.
17. *Mother Forest* 13.

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initials "C.K.": "One acquires an initial when one joins school. Janu never went to school. When she was seventeen, a Literacy Programme Coordinator, familiar with maintaining records, wrote 'Chekkote Kariyan' before Janu's name and thus filled her column in the mainstream society. It would not be long before enthusiastic tribal and dalit youth raised slogans in praise of 'our CK', thus heralding her entry both into Kerala's social order and into its political power structure as a tribal woman."[18] Bhaskaran obviously is referring to Janu's impending co-option by the "political" classes in Kerala. Perhaps in a not-very-distant future she is going to be integrated into the civil society as well. It is quite unlikely that Bhaskaran intended it – the Malayalam version of the introduction is a little more ambivalent on this – but one gets the impression that the statement is meant as a laudatory comment on Janu's promotion as a "successful" political leader of the state of Kerala.

This is a question that concerns language, which Janu seems to be aware of, in a certain sense. Making references to the formal speeches of the party leaders at the party classes that she attended while she was a member of the CPM, she says that those speeches were couched in a language that the tribals found difficult to understand. "They were full of strange words with hidden traps," she says.[19] She is also aware of the infiltration of words from the mainstream culture into the language of the tribals and "the rotten new spoken language" that the children of her community use today as a result of cultural assimilation.[20] Appearance of the term "civil society" in her vocabulary can be regarded as an instance of the way in which Janu herself has started assimilating the mainstream culture. Perhaps she does not care to remember that by positing civil society as the dominating other of the tribal communities, Janu's language also betrays her into the suggestion that the tribal society is an uncivil society. To civilize such uncivil segments of the society after all is the burden of the civilized world. If one were inclined to hear echoes of the likes of John Stuart Mill in this syntax, one might feel satisfied that the translation of Janu's past into autobiographical discourse on one hand, and its subsequent translation into English on the other, have in a sense proved to be attempts in that direction.

While the subject of Janu's book is the travails of a culture that has remained on the periphery of scholarly discourse in Malayalam for ages,

18. *Mother Forest* viii.
19. *Mother Forest* 34.
20. *Mother Forest* 34.

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that of AMN Chakiar's work belongs very much to the dominant pu
discourse. In this sense Chakiar's book represents the other of what Ja
autobiography embodies. Yet a closer look at the two works would re
that there are a number of interesting connections between these appare
dissimilar works. VR Krishna Iyer, the eminent jurist, in his Preface to
Last Smarta Vicharam recommends it as an indispensable read to ev
Indian, Keralite or not, "since the subject is of great relevance to o
times."[21] The relevance of the subject is that it pertains to the evil practi
of *smarta vicharam*, which consisted in the trial and punishment of a wom
for alleged sexual lapses, that was prevalent among the Namputhiri Bra
mins of Kerala for a long time till it was abrogated in the early decad
of the twentieth century. Chakiar's autobiography is about the last *smar*
vicharam that was held in 1918 in the state of Cochin in which a Namputhi
woman accused of adultery in the course of her trial mentioned the nam
of Chakiar's father, an aristocratic Namputhiri of Thripunithura, as one o
the men she had had liaison with while he was a young student in his earl
teens taking Vedic lessons from her elderly husband. Chakiar's father an
the children were instantly expelled from the Namputhiri clan and wer
made to live as members of a community much lower in rank in the cast
hierarchy: the Chakiar community. The excommunication and caste dem
tion came as a rude shock for Chakiar's father, who out of disgrace an
the feeling of guilt, committed suicide as soon as the verdict was given
This happened in the second decade of the twentieth century; and now in
The Last Smarta Vicharam, after a gap of about eighty years, ninety-year old
AMN Chakiar recounts this gripping story of the loss of caste identity an
its aftermath in the life of an eleven-year old boy.

A Brahmin male being forced to adopt a lower caste identity: this
is somewhat unusual in the cultural history of Kerala. This, apart from its
focus on the question of female sexuality, would go to make Chakiar's work
exceedingly interesting as a cultural document. The question of othering is
central to this document in that here is a concrete instance of a person who
has been culturally, and even physically, othered by the rigid caste system
in twentieth-century Kerala. Translation is at work right from the conception
of this autobiography because Chakiar first wrote this book in English
before it was picked up and published serially by the prominent Malayalam
weekly *Samakalika Malayalam*.[22] If translation, as some theorists have pointed

21. AMN Chakiar, *The Last Smarta Vicharam* ix.
22. The Malayalam version has KK Sankaran Namputhiri as the translator. It is published by the Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram.

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out,[23] is a work cognate with ethnography, both Janu's and Chakiar's autobiographies, in their own separate ways, could be described as of great ethnographic value. While ethnography operates in *Mother Forest* through the omnipresent eye of Bhaskaran,[24] in *The Last Smarta Vicharam* it can be said to work through the generic conventions of the autobiographical form as well as through the language of the author cast in the colonial mould. The ethnographer's language in a sense is unavoidable in a work like *The Last Smarta Vicharam* as the initial purpose of writing the work, as Chakiar pronounces in the Preface to the book, was to educate his friends and relatives on the historical and cultural circumstances that led to his metamorphosis from a Namputhiri to a Chakiar. It was with this end in mind that he wrote a sketchy outline of the book under the title "My Story" and circulated computer-generated copies of it among his close relatives two years before *The Last Smarta Vicharam* was published. This is what Chakiar has to say on the genesis of the book: "A few of my friends who happened to read 'My Story' said that being of nostalgic interest especially to historians and sociologists it would be worthwhile to publish it, with some changes to suit the general reader. I was thus persuaded to recast 'My Story', deleting portions which were too personal and not of general interest and adding two new chapters, an Introductory and an Epilogue."[25]

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23. The British ethnographer E E Evans-Pritchard was the most important theorist to elaborate this relation. John Sturrock talks about Evans-Prichard's role in establishing this point of view among professional ethnographers in the essay, John Sturrock, "Writing Between the Lines: the Language of Translation," *New Literary History* 21 (1990): 993-1013. Also see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and* Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988) and the essays in Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial* Encounter (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: The Humanities Press, 1988) for related views. See Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Poststructuralism and the Colonial Context* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995) chapter 2, for an overview of the debates on this. Niranjana's quote from Godfrey Lienhardt sums up the basic position regarding the relation between translation and ethnography: "The problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think . . . begins to appear largely as one of translation" (47).

24. Here is a typical specimen of Bhaskaran's ethnographic eye: "from the *erumadam* one could see the herds of elephants from far off. and the deer who came to savour the young shoots. one should never run uphill if trapped in front of an elephant. elephants run uphill quite fast. one should always run downhill. the elephants cannot catch you then. running downhill makes its tongue hang out. if the pigs came they were sure to dig up all that we planted. and they would do it stealthily in the night. but if the elephants came we could sense them by their spoor and we could drive them away by lighting fires or making a din" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 4).

25. *The Last Smarta Vicharam* vi

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The "general interest" that Chakiar refers to is not much differe from the interest that induces translation, the interest shown by the membe of a culture in knowing how members of a remote culture behave. Though planned as an autobiography, Chakiar's work is full of anthropo logical information regarding the history and development of the brahminic tradition in Kerala, the rites and rituals of the Namputhiris, the sociologica aspects of the custom of *smarta vicharam* and the details of a few *smarta vicharam* cases that created history in colonial Kerala. Here, for example, is a description of the austere lifestyle that a young Namputhiri boy is to follow while he is a *brahmachari*:

A *brahmachari* should not take any food or drink before bath or ablutions, he should sleep on a mat on the floor without any pillow, should wear only *kaupeenam*. . . . He should not use bad language or show anger, he should not speak while taking food, and if he wanted anything he should ask in Sanskrit. He should not mingle freely with the opposite sex nor associate with lower caste people, and if by chance he is touched by any outsider, he should take a bath before entering the *illom*.[27]

This is a language and a perspective that the colonial discipline of ethnography has cultivated in its analysis and description of non-Western societies. Chakiar maintains this ethnographic perspective even when he narrates personal and subjective experiences. After a person's expulsion from the community there is this custom of the person being ridiculed and physically thrown out of the company of his close relatives. The relatives themselves are expected to take a lead in this act called *kaikottipurathakkal* which literally means "expulsion with handclaps." Since Chakiar's father committed suicide on hearing the news of his excommunication, the son had to be the victim of this cruel exercise as a stand-in for the father. Look at the way Chakiar narrates this:

When I dutifully hurried down the staircase and reached near the Pandal, the Namputhiri assembly clapped their hands and ripples of subdued laughter escaped from them. I stopped short, stunned like a hunted deer at bay. Without waiting for any instruction, my little legs carried me back upstairs to collect my wits. At that time I did not understand the assembly's odd performance, but later I realized that the Namputhiris were executing the verdict of the Maharaja formally expelling me from their community by common consent.[28]

As for the generic convention of the autobiographical form conditioning the text's reception, one might remember that as a genre, right from

26. See Godfrey Lienhardt's observation in note 24 above.
27. *The Last Smarta Vicharam* 55-56.
28. *The Last Smarta Vicharam* 111.

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the days of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, autobiography is historically linked to conversion narratives that assert, as Laura Marcus states, "the supremacy of an enlightened present moment, perspective and consciousness."[29] Janu's and Chakiar's autobiographies are both conversion narratives in this sense, Janu's work narrating her conversion from an "uncivilized" tribal female to a potential leader of the civil society and Chakiar's work narrating his conversion of a different order, from a high-caste Namputhiri Brahmin to a member of a lower caste. The narration or translation of the conversion crisis in both cases is carried out from a present moment of enlightened understanding that allows both writers to re-read aspects of the "original" story from fresh perspectives. There may not be much sense in talking about the "spirit" of the original here, as the spirit in question is related to the enlightened understanding of the present. Interpreters of myths, legends, histories and life-stories – translators included – often present their tales as retaining the spirit of the original in their tales, though in truth, as in Anand's story, the whole thing is a hoax played on the reader. This indeed is inevitable, as all the above exercises are to be treated as acts of translation, and in translation one cannot help being a traitor of some kind. There are only two options before the translator, which, as we saw in the last chapter, has been identified very precisely by Lee Siegel: one can either be a "traitor to the 'spirit' of a [work] by attempting to be literal, or a traitor to [its] 'letter' by attempting to be literary."[30]

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29. Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses* 168.

30. Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1978) 234. The publishing history of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's English novel *Rajmohan's Wife* will in a sense foreground the problems that one faces in dealing with the relation between translations and their original. As is quite well known, after Bankimchandra wrote this novel in 1864, it was serialized in a short-lived weekly magazine called *The Indian Field* the same year, but was never published in book form during his lifetime. This was mainly because after writing *Rajmohan's Wife* the author gave up writing in English, and turned to writing novels in Bengali, in which he eventually wrote fourteen novels, all to be celebrated as classics by Bengali readers. He even thought of translating *Rajmohan's Wife* and publishing it as a Bengali novel, in which effort he did not go beyond translating the first few chapters of the novel. The novel was first published in book form in 1935 by Brojendranath Banerjee, who could not locate the issues of *The Indian Field* in which the first three chapters of the novel had appeared. He therefore translated the missing chapters into English from the incomplete Bangali translation by Bankimchandra and included them in the novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee recounts this history in her Foreward to the reissue of the novel published in 1996. See Bankimchandra Chatterjee, *Rajmohan's Wife: A Novel* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996). Meenakshi Mukherjee's Foreword and Brajendranath Banerjee's Preface to the 1935 edition of the novel can be seen in pages v-xi of this edition.

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To return to Anand's story and the concealed argument regarding the act of translation that it contains, one might ask oneself what it means to be "literal" and "literary" in the conceptual context of auto/biographical discourses. Although Anand's work is advertised as a novel and is acknowledged by the bibliographer as one that belongs to the genre of fiction, there is very little in the actual content of the book that announces itself as fiction. In writing this novel Anand uses a very straight and simple language with no decorative frills usually associated with literary discourse. This is the kind of language that critics generally associate with translation, especially of the literal variety. There is no fictionality here, nor is there any attempt to create a world of make believe. On the other hand, both Janu and Chakiar, in spite of the status of their works as non-fiction, can be said to exploit structures of fictionality in order to enhance their books' readability. To give an example from *The Last Smarta Vicharam*, though it is clear that eleven year old Chakiar was never made privy to the finer details of the trial of *smarta vicharam* when the event really took place – he had to eavesdrop on the conversations carried out in monosyllables behind his back by the elders in the family – he finds it appropriate to provide a narrative on what really transpired at the trial session involving the accused woman and the *smartan* who conducted the trial. In fact in chapter 4 of the book, after the description of the group of Vedic scholars who by custom was appointed by the Maharaja to look into the complaint against the erring woman, one would come across a word-for-word transcript of the presumed "exchange" between the woman and the *smartan* that has been wholly invented by the writer.[31] As for Janu, we cannot decide where the author's memory has "failed" her, or where Bhaskaran's language has propped it up. All that we know is that that the language of *Mother Forest* is somewhat literary, parts of the work giving the impression of a well-made work of art. Look at the concluding paragraph of the autobiography that reads more like a passage from a novel than as the sentences from a personal narrative.[32] The narrator here seems to be at pains to construct a past for her that agrees

31. *The Last Smarta Vicharam* 99. This exchange is prefixed by the statement: "The including session of the inquiry committee could safely be presumed to have taken some such form as under."

32. This is how *Mother Forest* closes: "in my childhood there were no mirrors at home. and there was no such tradition either. i saw a mirror for the first time when i went to vellamunda as a maid to look after a baby. it had a wooden handle. . . . when i came back from vellamunda i found a piece of mirror stuck with some dung on the back wall of our hut. a tiny little piece of mirror. we preserve our seeds like this, stuck to our walls with dung. i never knew who stuck that piece of mirror to the wall like a seed. because it was tiny it was not possible to see myself fully in it. it could show me only in fragments. need to buy a whole mirror" (55-56).

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in spirit with her present state of exalted existence that is reflected in the exalted language of the autobiography.

To be literary, then, is to retrieve the "spirit" of the original lying buried in the past, which as we have seen, is done from the vantage point of the enlightened present. The experience of the present after all is an illusion, and what passes for the present indeed is the memory of what has just been the present. As for the past, it is always recast in the present, and its shape, as several contemporary theorists including Foucault argue, is more an effect of the present's interest in the past than its cause.[33] This observation is immensely relevant in the reading of life writing as it prompts one to look upon the reconstruction of the past as an effect of the present's nostalgia for the past. It is this that makes autobiographical narration the imposition of a coherent pattern on an essentially incoherent past. Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* uses the fascinating expression "lying nostalgia" to describe the inevitable distortions that follow the present's reconstructions of the past. Anna Wulf, the writer protagonist of Lessing's self-deconstructed novel, can be seen to ruminate, as does the narrator of Anand's novel, over the effects of this nostalgia that garble and falsify her experiences as they receive a narrative form.[34] Anna Wulf's novel "Frontiers of War," written apparently in response to her nostalgia for her past life in war-time Central Africa, has not been true in its final, narrated form to her "real" emotional experiences. This indeed is what happens in the translation of the past in autobiographical discourses too. Translation inevitably leads to a sort of othering, a process that involves the suppression of what might be called the "letter" of the original, by which I do not mean the linguistic layer of the original that the literary translator is famed to ignore. The letter of the original in the context of the life story of an individual is to be understood as the inter-textual complex of the discursive geography of the past with all its interpretive potential. A narrative, Romila Thapar says, "can have its own biography and the changes it manifests can provide us with a view of historical change."[35] Quite true. Equally true is the suggestion that historical changes in the auto/biography of a person should also be manifest in the narrative. It is this cryptic message on translation, conveniently ignored in their separate ways by Janu and Chakiar, that Anand's novel ultimately conveys.

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33. Foucault's oft-quoted description of himself as a "historian of the present" can be said to sum up the diverse strands of the argument that post-structuralists in general have made on this question.
34. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Paladin, 1989) 77.
35. Romila Thapar, *Narratives and the Making of History* 2.

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Daughters of India by Margaret Wilson, series editor Ralph Crane, Oxford University Press, India; 2007, Pp. 244, Rs.450.

In her day, Margaret Wilson (1882-1973) was something of a literary celebrity. She gained an early reputation with her short stories based in India, *Tales of a Polygamous City* (1917-1921); and won the Pulitzer Prize with her first novel, *The Able McLaughlins* (1923). Her third novel, *Daughters of India*, was published in 1928. But within half a century, her books and her name were all but forgotten. This new edition of *Daughters of India* is OUP India's third in a series of 'forgotten' Raj novels, all edited by Australian academic Ralph Crane.

Ralph Crane has provided a chronology of the important events in Margaret Wilson's life, a map of Punjab in the early twentieth century, and fulsome explanatory footnotes for each chapter. And, along with Radhika Mohanram, he has written an introduction that helpfully places the novel within its historical context. For instance, it was as recently as 1920 that American women won the right to vote. Just one year before the publication of *Daughters of India*, Wilson's fellow-American Katherine Mayo had published her much debated and controversial book, *Mother India*. Mayo had written scathingly about Indian society and what she considered its many ills, especially its poor treatment of women and its unfortunate customs such as child-marriage. Wilson's book borrows its title from a non-fiction book published in 1908 by Mary Jane Campbell who was a missionary in India.

Wilson's heroine Davida is an American missionary teacher who goes to India to work for the uplift of oppressed Indian women, and is a character who is clearly based on the author herself. The daughter of Scottish Presbyterian immigrant farmers in Iowa, Margaret Wilson was in her early twenties when she served as a missionary in northern India. During her six years in India, she taught at the Gujranwala Girls' School and was also an assistant to Dr Maria White at the Sialkot Hospital. Her novel explores the relationship between Davida Baillie and John Ramsey, her fellow-American superior in the mission at Aiyanianwala (fictional Gujranwala?), and their work with the poor residents of the Flowery Basti.

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An interesting feature of Wilson's book is its multi-genre identity: it is a missionary novel, a feminist novel, a romantic novel and an adventure novel, all rolled into one. *Daughters of India* invites comparison with a much more famous 'missionary', 'feminist' and 'gothic romantic' novel—Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Davida and Jane are both independent-minded young women who are attracted to the missionary life, but, while the American woman embraces it, Jane ultimately rejects it. Jane's rejected suitor, St John Rivers, goes alone to work among the natives in India, while Jane remains in England and marries Rochester. For Jane and her missionary cousin, it is as though romantic and sexual love for a partner of the opposite sex may not co-exist with love for Christ. But Davida is a passionate woman who has both a spiritual love for God, manifested in her missionary service, and a romantic love for Ferguson that continues in spite of his death.

As a missionary novel, *Daughters of India* extols a life of poverty and a dedication to lightening the sufferings of others. Biblical references by the narrator are strewn throughout the book. Davida's teaching from the Bible is novel and seductive. Her pupils learn to sing and to role-play Bible stories: "They played Jesus washing the disciples' feet.... They played Salome dancing before Herod, bringing John the Baptist's head—an old red veil wrapped into a ball, with a ragged red edge hanging over the side of the tin dish for blood dripping."

As an American and a missionary, Wilson was doubly an 'outsider' in Anglo-India. Her heroine is something of a loose canon and has a feisty streak. When the doctor says: "I'd rather have charge of a cholera epidemic, of famine relief, than a lady missionary", Davida's quick rejoinder is: "Nobody has got charge of me!"

Through the character of Davida, Wilson could offer an independent perspective on British imperialism. Race, class, caste, polygamy, female infanticide and child marriage are among the issues she confronts. Davida's view of British colonialism is evident in her dislike of its authority figures such as 'His Majesty's Superintendent of Police'. "I am not English. I have nothing to do with these government affairs!" she says, more than once, and she considers the Superintendent to be a "Horrid, nasty Englishman!"

Wilson's heroine is not without her flaws. She enjoys being "the Miss Sahib" - a kind of 'lady bountiful' dispensing education and advice among the poor and illiterate. The author says: "The children adored her and their mothers poured out their gratitude upon her presence". But luckily Davida does have the endearing quality of self-criticism. She chastises herself: "I am as bad as the Police Sahib, as bad as the silliest arrogant Englishman who ever vaunted the superiority of his white skin."

Davida is a chatty and sociable woman. The lively language is one

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of the strengths of this book. There is a lot of direct speech and it adds to the colour and vividness of the events. Wilson seems to have been a close observer of the Indian society with which she interacted. At times she uses almost literal translations in the speeches of her Indian characters. An old Muslim supplicant addresses Davida thus: "'O Government! O Dominion! Have mercy upon us! Have mercy upon us, sir! Give us help, O Lord!'" and Wilson goes on to explain: "He was one of those proper old farmers who addressed her in the masculine, to demonstrate, as it were, that he was magnanimously blind to her feminine inferiority."

In contrast to Davida, Wilson's Indian characters are mostly two-dimensional. The widow Taj is convinced that "A woman's place ... is in her home", and exudes a flirtatious sexuality that causes Davida to stereotype Indian women: "They marry every day. They love easily. Anybody will do for them."

If Wilson's plot is rather thin—about the breaking up of a kidnapping ring in the village of Pir Khanwala—her novel is nevertheless rich in anecdotes. There is, for instance, the ironic story of John Ramsey persuading a new convert to remove an amulet against snakebite from his child's arm, only to have the child die of a cobra bite the very next day. Davida sometimes uses stories to teach—stories like the humorous tale of the daughter-in-law who learns not to answer back when her mother-in-law scolds her.

Daughters of India is a colonial novel that provides a unique snapshot of life on the 'margins of society' under the Raj in the early twentieth century. Along with Wilson's *Trousers of Taffeta* (1929), it has an assured place in Anglo-Indian fiction, and OUP is to be commended for bringing out this new edition of *Daughters of India*.

Debjani Chatterjee

God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati by Annamayya; tr. by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, Oxford University Press, 2005, Pp.142, Rs 395

There are several outright amazing things about this translation of Telegu padams by Annamayya, a 15th century devotee-poet of Lord Venkatesvara

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of Tirupati. First, a massively popular temple and a deity have given rise to a corpus of poems in which the idea of god as deity – indeed the very idea of deification – are challenged by poems which celebrate and explore god's transcendental nature. And yet, at the very same time, with stunning amplitude of imagination, the poet also rejoices in (and mocks at) the completely incarnated nature of the god on the hill, as he exists in mythologies surrounding these incarnations. Second, it turns out that piety need only be one tiny strand of the genre known as 'devotional' poetry. In Annamayya's hands at least, devotion can translate into all manner of attitudes – doubt, reverence, mockery, slyness, angst, passion. Third, the description of sexual love is, in the work of such a poet, a highly favoured mode of bringing the god and his consort alive and therefore, presumably, closer to human experience. And the fourth amazing thing is surely the translation itself, which in its clarity, pithiness, wit, sensitivity and contemporariness brings Annamayya breathtakingly close to us. This is the kind of translation that makes one's hair stand on end. There is something undeniably spooky about being able to hear a poet from five hundred years ago speak to you in such a direct voice and such an immediately recognisable idiom. (The translators say that this has at least as much to do with the poet as with them: "If some of the translations sound too modern to the reader, we want to reassure him or her that in no case have we strayed far from the connotations and meanings of the original. Annamayya's "modernity" is one of the surprising features of this corpus and might want to make us rethink the question of when a "modern" sensibility began to emerge in south India." pg xii)

But to go back to the first of my four points: the poet's awareness of god's transcendence interwoven with his recognition of *the* god's almost-human form, complete with human-like fallibility. Annamayya apparently composed some thirty-two thousand Telegu lyric songs called padams. Thirteen thousand of these were inscribed on copper plates and stored in a vault in the Tirupati temple where they can still be found. A quarter of these padams are written in the adhyatma or metaphysical mode and the rest in the sringara or erotic mode. God in the adhyatma poems takes on a variety of forms even as he always remains the god on the hill. The most dominant form perhaps, at least in this selection, is god as a form of self-knowledge. "Seeing is one thing,/ looking is another./ If both come together,/ that is god" starts out one poem whose refrain is – "God is what you have in your mind". Another poem goes: "You're just about as much as one imagines you to be [...] People who follow Vishnu love you as Vishnu./ Philosophers speak of you as the ultimate./ Those who go with Shiva think of you as Shiva..." A third poem says, "...if you keep spinning in the senses, your mind knows no rest./ If you sleep inside yourself, you

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won't know the world outside./ Forget – forget your mind – and in the solitude you'll see god..."

Complementing this god who tends to be immanent in all things and, therefore, both easily graspable and yet frustratingly elusive, this god who is a principle rather than a presence, is the other kind of god. This latter god is imbued with moral qualities rather than metaphysical ones. Perhaps because of this, he is locked into a dialectical relationship with man, unlike the metaphysical god. So to this god, Annamayya can say – "Imagine that I wasn't here. What would you do with your kindness?/ You get a good name because of me." Or "You made eyes for seeing,/so why blame me when I look?/ You made ears for beautiful sounds./ I act but you've set me up." Or "We get a lot out of you./ You don't have that skill./God, your servants are better than you./ We grab you with a show of devotion./ We stick you in our mind."

This range of emotions takes me back to the point I made about Annamayya's complex understanding of devotion. He is not afraid to poke fun at the god and then erase himself trying to submit to him. Clearly both attitudes come out of a deep intimacy resulting from a lifetime of thinking about and addressing the god on the hill. This startling range of moods and tones is also something the translators draw attention to, but in another context. Most of the adhyatma poems are written in the voice of the seeker, one of whose concerns is to shake off the attachments of the material world. One of the deadliest of such attachments are women, and Rao and Shulman point out how the speaker in such poems is very clearly misogynist. And yet, the sringara poems are most often written in the voice of a woman, usually Venkatesvara's wife, Alamelumanga. The amazing thing is not just that Annamayya so effortlessly takes on the female voice but that he enters uniquely feminine attitudes—the insistence on subtlety in lovemaking, for instance. There is boldness too, as in the poem which begins with the lines: "I'll serve you as best as I can,/ but some things I just can't do./ I can melt your heart just like that,/ but I can't stop you breaking out in sweat./ I can sink my teeth deep into your lips,/ but I can't help it if they leave marks." There is a feline cunningness: "Patience is policy/ for women. Don't confront./ Men are soft./ [...] Don't show your strength./ Just laugh./ That's where your skill really lies." There are lovers' quarrels and the wish to hold out and yet the irresistible need to succumb: one poem begins– "When I'm done being angry,/ *then* I'll make love./ Right now, you should be glad/ I'm listening..." but three stanzas later she says—"You hug me, I hug you back./ You can see I'm still burning... I can't help it god on the hill,/I'm engulfed in your passion."

Let alone not stereotypically devotional, the frankness and downright

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sexiness, of these poems would put a contemporary poet to shame. The characters here don't seem bound by the conventions of any particular poetic form—they speak as distinct individuals, out of an individual subjectivity. The translators point out that the immediacy of the sringara poems also says something about Annamayya's preferred mode of address. In the female mode, Annamayya is "capable of controlling the god, demanding his attention, and enjoying his love. The listener cannot escape a clear-cut perception that the female, sringara persona is somehow more fulfilling, indeed more full [...] In his "female" self, he seems playful, happy, and complete. Maleness, with its tentative selfness, has receded or fallen away." (Page 133) It is worth noting, in this context, that the god himself has traces of a female persona in his history. Apparently there is a local legend according to which Venkatesvara was originally a goddess; today the goddess - Padmavati or Alamelumanga - has an important role in the mythology surrounding Tirupati, even though the temple to her is at the base of the hill and not on its summit.

The noticeable difference of style between the metaphysical and erotic poems has carried over into the translation partly, I think, because of the translators' liberal use of colloquial expressions in the latter. This is important because most of these poems are composed in the *voice* of the goddess or are, to use one of the translators' phrases, "bedroom conversation". Phrases like "cut it out", "keep a lid on it", "when I'm done being angry", "what's eating you?" heighten the effect listening in on a conversation. Rao and Shulman's willingness to use such strikingly modern expressions leads to the following effect, an effect that probably all translators aspire for: namely, that the text becomes translucent. In its felicity and persuasiveness the translation does not erase the original—rather, it begins to make the original shimmer below its own surface. One may think that to speak in Annamayya's voice one must find an idiom in English that through some linguistic feat approximates to the 15th century idiom he used. This pair of translators show, on the other hand, that translations must speak to us in familiar languages not made-up ones. And if this seems like going far from the original, then what better than turning to Annamayya's words: "Being far is just like being near...Distant rivers always reach the sea."

Anjum Hasan

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Build A Bridge by Gnana Moonesinghe, Konark Publishers, Pp.142, Rs300/-

Moonesinghe who devides her time between Sri Lanka and India, is a Sri Lankan who feels deeply for her country now strife ridden for over two decades,and has through five down to earth crafted short stories sketched a disturbing yet true picture of her unfortunate people.It is the rich that always seem to get away from the killings and the mayhem that follows a cleverly engineered riot, as also it invariably is the poor and homeless that normally undergo all the suffering.This is the candid truth that Gnana through her compassionate and revealing eye,reiterates in her compelling and easily readable stories that do not pad or pontify anything.Set amongst simple people who appear doomed to their fate in a world that they find difficult to comprehend, it tells the saga of commoners who must find their own kind of solutions to living out life as best as they can.That the stories and the locale pertains to wars,soldiers and strife,makes it doubly worthwhile for a soldier writer like this reviewer, to profit from as also recommend to other readers who might not know much about such a way of life.

'Private Mohan' is the story of a soldier whose grand mother ekes out a living on a patch of dry land,and also looks after the boy's wife who keeps her the sole company when the husband is away fighting a war that they do not understand.Along comes a journalist who becomes a frequent visitor to the home of the two women,who await the return of Mohan,but that was not to happen as he is killed in action.What happens next is the story of facing life as it comes or as it is thrust upon them,and shows the resilience and fortitude with which the two ladies continue to go about their business.Mohan sums up the life of a soldier[anywhere in the world,and as we saw during the Kargil war],when he says, "Who will care for us Atchie,because,once you join you will be known only as Private 3472 or whatever number is assigned to you.There will only be you waiting for me to come home either in person or in a box or even in a bag.Who knows?" But when will the civilian masters and politicians who rule us,ever understand the sacrifices of their soldiers who are sworn to die without even asking a single question as to why that had to be so. 'A voice from the carnage' is the depiction of a frenzied racial carnage where a member of a family sees five members of his family killed in his presence,and he not having the courage to speak up or fight to save them from this terrible death.It is also a sad commentary on those who till a day back were friendly

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neighbours and acquaintances, but who today have no compulsion in hacking to death those whom they knew so well. In 'Maya my daughter,Maya the heroine',the clash between the Tamils and the majority community in Sri Lanka comes out vividly when a character says, "You are aware of our present situation—the slide towards total degredation for us Thamils.The marginalising of the Thamil people by the majority in this country continues unabated". 'Sudath the rebel' tells the story of a hard working boy who drops out of school to become a rebel and extremist for the cause of his people,and whose father is killed by the security forces.Ironically,another person not directly connected with the revolution is also affected by the events that have beset the country,and falls a casualty to the beliefs of freedom of speech and individual action that he respects and cherishes.

The short story 'In the nick of time' describes a couple Savitri and Kumar quietly digging away for precious stones on a land patch that they own,and the yearning of the wife for independence of action that she has never had and that she could possibly attain if she found a rare diamond on her own before her husband could do so. " But predetermined rules of living brought about the balance", and helped her to come to a sound decision not to disturb the trust that existed between man and wife.She told the husband that she too had been digging the patch and had just discovered the diamond,and that it was the good fortune of both the members. Gnana writes, "At this point,the gem and what it portended for heir future seemed irrelevant.Their bonding through their combinbed effort took precedence."

Gnana possesses a keen eye for detail,and sees life through a compassionate blend of hope and trust.As a first attempt at fiction this is a noteworthy effort and one hopes that she will continue to keep her ears very close to the Sri Lankan soil from where her stories and experiences stem from.

Himmat Singh Gill

The Penguin Book of Classic Urdu Stories Ed. by M. Asaduddin, Penguin Viking India, Pp 287, Rs.395/-

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The genre of Urdu short story is not much explored, as also its comparatively brief century long history. The same has been the fate of its longer

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version. Studies available in English are few and far between, and so are showcase anthologies. Fewer still individual collections. Much compilation that has taken place in the past decade, thanks to five decades of the break-up of the subcontinent, relates to the theme of partition, and what has it meant to the writers on either side of the border. And even though this outpouring has been heart-rending, readable, authentic, lyrical and depicting felt or observed reality, almost all of it borders on the pathos. What, however, distinguishes between borders is the diverse style despite the commonality of emotions, apart from the somewhat conventional from Pakistan to a little more experimental and universal narrative patterns in India.

For the non-Urdu reader, whether it is the straight *afsana* or the *jadeed afsana*, whether the conventional or the experimental, realistic or abstract, shorter fiction – as is evident from the limited fare available – even though surreal, excelling in the allegorical has been found to be lacking in humour. And this has not only been the case with partition fiction, but also what has followed in the six decades. Almost all of it is very serious stuff. As if happiness has flown out of the window. Even the post-Partition Urdu fiction writer does not seem to have emerged from the world of the poor and the disadvantaged; the world of the pimps and the prostitutes. At least that is the impression one gets from the stories available in anthology after anthology. In that sense, the present anthology is no different. It fails to show the reader a different world.

It is, undoubtedly a brilliant collection of classical stories. These stories cannot be defined by any other nomenclature. But it is an attempt that hardly necessitated any effort, though the editor has sought to justify his selection. One has come across them in any number of anthologies. The editor has obviously played safe. No one can question the selection. But personally one would have been happier if Asaduddin had tried to assemble an anthology of stories which are actually classical, have stood the test of literary life, and are not easily accessible. Since the compilation is neither chronological, nor historical, not even representative of a certain kind the editor could have easily left aside the Partition saga. Five of the sixteen stories here bear the burden of Partition. How long has the reader to suffer the memories of human madness? Besides, hasn't the contemporary Urdu writer of the subcontinent something more to offer. And as Asaduddin himself indicates, there was no shortage of alternatives: "the fact remains that for each story chosen for this volume, there were one or two others that could have been selected with equal justification....Moreover, for constraints of space I had to drop a couple of stories at the last moment." He, however, does not indicate which ones. And which, in effect, also means belonging to the same theme, the same time zone.

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The placid, though informative brief introduction is silent on various counts. It does not even mention Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. Does he not even deserve a mention either in the context of the Progressive writers' movement, or with regards to his contribution to the evolution of the Urdu short story? What about *Ababeel* ('Sparrow') which found its way to a selection of hundred best stories of the world, or *Sardarji* in the context of Partition? It does not justify the non-inclusion of Sajjad Zaheer, one of the drafters of the Progressive Writers' charter, or for that matter Zamiruddin Ahmad "a powerful short-story writer", in the editor's own admission. But though generally dismissed, even laughed at as a writer, it has been found imperative to include Krishan Chandar and his story "Kalu Bhangi' (why not 'Peshawar Express' but then that can be within the realm of 'alternatives!). "Krishan Chandar was a writer in a hurry, churning out volumes of formulaic narratives in unending succession, which prompted Bedi to remark, 'If he could also *tell* a story'!" But then Bedi also once asked 'Why does Manto have to be so dramatic in his stories?' And Manto's reply: 'What is sensationalism to one, is reality to another.' These, however, are issues that can be debated ad nauseam. And in the context of "modernism and experimentation" writers like Anwar Azeem and Sagar Sarhadi – apart from others – don't even deserve a passing reference?

Asaduddin has chosen not to provide a summary "of the stories selected" though that would have served a useful purpose. The anthology being in English translation is obviously meant for a wider non-Urdu readership for which a little thematic annotation could have been of added interest. Therefore, in the context of its wider use, and by suggesting that he was guided by "the preference of generations of Urdu readers as reflected through magazines, books, critical articles and opinion polls conducted by some reputed journals" he seems to sing a contradictory tone. The same seems to be the reasoning for gender preference: only three unavoidable women writers from amongst the sixteen—Ismat Chugtai, Qurratulain Hyder and Khalida Husain. But having said all that, one must admit there is no denying the significance or import of the anthology. It certainly documents some of the finest fiction of the twentieth century Urdu short story. A more elaborate introduction would have certainly added to the classicism of the effort. As also a documentation of the time-frame or dates when they had actually been written. More so in the context of the Partition stories because not all of them an immediate product of the unfortunate event. The translations, without exception, are excellent and add to the worthiness of the anthology.

Suresh Kohli

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Reading Partition/Living Partition Ed. by Jasbir Jain, Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2007, Rs.750.

When one looks at the writings of Partition, whether in novels or in any other narratives, what fundamentally strikes the nerve-centre of one's being is the endless and uncompromising ways in which they are replicated. Like the boundaries of the nation are imaginatively and metaphorically differed (resonating the idea- 'imagined communities' by Benedict Anderson) or the new concepts of the nation are, as Partha Chatterjee says, given to us in a 'derivative discourse', these discourses too, in their vast corpus of the-atricality play between what is said and not said or rather, the fear of being said. Jasbir Jain in her *Reading Partition/ Living Partition* makes an attempt to recapitulate and systematize a vast corpus of Partition narratives. What interests anyone in this peculiar attempt is the method she has employed to arrange such a vast body of writings. In her preface to the text, she writes: 'Partition is real, concrete than the memory.....'. Perhaps this concreteness is what urges anyone to compile a volume of different genres dealing with a particular theme. At the same time, would this concreteness, at times, offer a different argument against some of the postmodern and postcolonial writings of our time?

Reading Partition/ Living Partition comprises twenty eight pieces of Partition writing incorporating the most famous Krishna Sobti's extracts from *Zindaginama*, Kamaleshwar's accounts on *Kitne Pakistan* and several other scholarly articles and reminiscences. There are some writers in this volume who have not figured in some of the major discussions of the same theme elsewhere before and some others empowering their pedantic scholasticism by looking at Partition from various angles of post-Independent Indian social scenario. Jasbir Jain's own article titled ' Writing, Trauma and History' shows justice to the ever ending quest of glancing Partition and its associated questions by examining issues of Intiaz Hussain's and Manto's narratives.

Examining a work of different genres and methodologies, one needs to be accurate at highlighting the structural and thematic associations and variations. While reading Krishna Sobti's accounts behind the composition of *Zindaginama*, we come across a genuine urge of 'writing history'. As Sobti points out the difference between official history and the history from below, marks a tentative division in the postcolonial writings of our times. Perhaps, this urge to relativise the past by looking at the various tropes of history

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is resonated by Begum Anis Kidwai's and Mohan Kalpana's autobiographical pieces in the text. In both their extracts, the 'self' transgresses the boundaries of representation and looks for certain platforms for articulation. However, this urge for articulation is not the same when the texts of Partition are being interpreted.

The two interesting studies of the texts of Partition are offered by Harish Narang in his study of Sadat Hasan Manto's stories and Nilufer E.Barucha in her examination of Bapsi Sidhwa's fiction. Narang stresses on the irony of Manto and shows how this ironic mode offers a scathing critique of the question of nationalism or in a more precise way, the process of writing itself. Though some of Manto's stories like *Toba Tek Singh* have been analysed by a variety of Partition scholars, none of them could really examine the difficult and distaste political punches and the fluidity of language that operates through an ironic mode as Narang's study does. In short, Narang's examination pays respect to the issue of language more than a metaphoric tool as a potential element of decolonization. Nilufar E Barucha in her article on *Ice Candy Man* looks at closely the thematic paradigms of the text and its film version. Any text of Partition in its own underlayerings of sociological questions becomes another text in film.

Glancing at another important section of the historical narratives, the articles of Kamaleshwar, Usha Bande and Bandana Chakrabarty scrutinize memory as an important platform upon which incidents are re-presented through writing. Memory's role is severely contested and its systemic differences are recorded in several Partition narratives. The reemergence of the collective memory is the most important aspect of the postcolonial times as it weaves aside a considerable chunk of the oral narratives. Kamaleshwar, in his *Kitne Pakistan*, tries to empower this aspect. But a subtle difficulty here is the aspect of the death/destruction of memory. In several Western narratives, this 'traumatic' phase is compensated by a separate idea of reinvention of memory. The sites of violence that emerge in several Partition narratives need to be studied by looking at this aspect closely. Such a study still needs to be developed in the Indian context also.

An entirely different article titled 'Intersection Time' by Anisur Rahman attests a political agenda in the phase of the political and historical conjectures of the post-Independent India. If one believes that our intersection time is 1947, as this study rightly points out, there can be more darkness waiting for us (quibbling the term-Freedom at Midnight). This intersecting time, therefore, needs to be reinterpreted rather than imposing sectarian and partisan divisions among the Hindus and Muslims both in India and Pakistan. Paradoxically, 1947, is an year when one mentally constructs the walls between two religions.

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Two fundamental problems of this book are its lack of concentration upon the language of the Partition narratives and the absence of any study looking at the future of the Partition narratives. In depicting the partitioned lands and minds, several writers of our times sneak into the troves of the immediate and the distant pasts. However, there is a troubled future also for the narratives to appear on Partition when there are innumerable domestic partitions and a global divide through all of us are passing. Who will address the issues of the unwanted migrants, dispossessed and the shamans of our times? What histories will be written about the distanced multitudes of the periphery that still thrive in several no-man's lands? These issues still haunt us and there are no narrow passageways. Keeping aside these problems, *Reading Partition/Living Partition* is good attempt to understand Partition narratives by making the narratives as well as the authors speak.

Krishnan Unni. P.

So Many Journeys by Shiela Gujral, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 2006, Pp.142. Rs.295/-

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So Many Journeys, the reader gets a close overview of the talent of the poet, fiction writer and biographer, Shiela Gujral who has been writing in English, Hindi and Punjabi for nearly half a century. At once intimate and exclusive, the book offers in first person point of view the record of the author's historic journeys reflected in the backwaters of mind and spirit. Dr Karan Singh who has written foreword to the book finds it a commentary on the contemporary global landscape. "The book provides an interesting commentary," he says, "on the events in India and abroad over the last several decades." The places visited by Shiela Gujral are charming though, these assume larger significance being associated with great people. She experienced her visits from the high pedestal of being the wife of the Prime Minister of India, Mr I.K. Gujral which also enabled her to have access to scores of things generally unreachable by the common authors.

Divided into four sections the book lays as much emphasis on the personalities as the topography. Eventually, the physical journey to places transcends to overpowering recollections of the events and the interaction with the people. This is well borne out by the sumptuous seventeen sketches

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of the first section /"Reflections and Revelation". To cite an example in the chapter entitled "This is Life", she brings out pretty poignantly the human tragedy concerning Victoria Breznev, who gave up the ghost after long illness, hapless and forsaken. The author recalls vividly her halcyon days when top echelons were at her attendance and she commanded grandly the centre stage. Writing about one of the functions organised by Victoria Breznev, the author adds, "....the duty bound lady sat almost till end. No smile, no frown, this solid looking homely lady seemed to be trained in regimented discipline." The same celebrity after the death of her husband suffered untold neglect: "Her friends, kith and kin , even her own children did not bother to visit her....She lingered on all those years in a solitary room."

In the memoir, "Manifestation of God in Atheist Land", the author who was yet to recover from a severe attack of urticaria, portrays transcendent power of a tree which reminds us of Seamus Heaney's experience in his "God in the Tree". The deified tree which braves the nature's fury stoically inspires her to face the ailment boldly. The implied message did work and she resumed her routine with reassured confidence. It moved her to write a poem, "Magic Cure" on the event. The poem appears in the end of the chapter. Along side this personal poetic world of spiritual transcendence , is the human compassion that stimulates her in the reflections like the parting scene in "The Spirit Revived" at Ashkabad in Russia where the simple folks rush back home to bring her a return gift of hand knitted baby booty in coarse wool. The author puts on record how this was the most precious memento for her family.

Likewise, in the "Memorable Trip to Korea" which is one of the twelve memoirs in the "Travels" section, Shiela Gujral passionately writes about the memento she received from the Korean poetess, Kim Yang Shik. When she called on the poetess, the latter wrote down a special poem in honour of the author and presented her. A similar poetic reciprocity is not however found from the British poetess, Katheleen Raine whom the author visited in London. The author narrates her London visit and the pageant of life in the Palace Gardens at length in the sketch "An Unforgettable Trip to London". Another readable piece in this section is "Paa-Ya-Paa, the Temple of Culture, Kenya". Paa-Ya-Paa is a Swahili word which means 'the antelope rises'. It suggests symbolically rising of creative adventure. Paa-Ya-Paa is an institute on the outskirts of Nairobi, a famous meeting place of the creative talents; poets, artistes and the fiction writers. It encourages free expression and bold creative experiments. The author gives a detailed appraisal of the art gallery here and vitality of the African art. She hopes, "one day it will become a pilgrimage place for all the artistes and the art lovers of the world."

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One notice a reporter's talent in the author (she did a diploma in journalism) when she arrives to write the chapter, "Maasai Mara Trip–An Unforgettable Experience" driving home to readers amazing revelations about the Maasai Mara culture. Maasai Mara is a wild life sanctuary where the tented camps are of splendid attraction to the tourists. Life goes on as in primitive times in the villages around and there are six villages in the vicinity. Having gone round the sanctuary, watching wild animals, the author in the end visits one of the villages where her guide informs, "Our staple diet is blood and sour milk". Unable to trust her ears, the author implores him to speak the truth. "Yes madam," the guide repeats, "our basic food is blood and sour milk. We also supplement it with meat." The author who makes a foray into tribal houses, delineates the interiors of the dwellings seen from close quarter, the life style and the custom of the tribal folks. About the marriage custom, the guide informs, "the girls are sold," and hastens to add, they are "sold like the cattle to the best bidder." Curiously, despite his western education the guide himself is not free from this pagan practice and informs, for his marriage his father "has decided to give six cattle to the bride's father. I am getting married next year."

The "Travels" section closes with the chapter, "A Lucky Sojourn–Syria" wherein even after the day's tiring schedule the author is unable to sleep and becomes restless to write down her thoughts. She makes an almost a somnambulist attempt to write a poem, "Palmyra, Syria" which appears in lull in the end of the chapter. Swaying with clear, direct feeling, the opening lines are:

> The wind weaved a winding tale
> And whispered in my ears,
> I was in trance!
> The pageant of pagan glory
> Dazzled my mind's eyes.

An overflowing warmth attracts our attention when Shiela Gujral writes on the great figures she has personally met or known. Of the seven sketches in the "Personalities" section, five are obit pieces in which she pays rich tributes to Beatrice Wood, Lt. General J.S. Aurora, Pope John Paul II, Bhisham Sahani and Raisa Gorbachev (the Glasnost's First lady). In the opening piece, "Mahatmaji's Spirit Prevailed Everywhere", the author offers a picturesque account of Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg taking the readers along all those places associated with Gandhiji. Of special curiosity is the dungeon cell in Johannesburg where Gandhiji was incarcerated in 1908 and 1910 (later Nelson Mandela too). The place enumerated are the Tolstoy Farm, the Phoenix Ashram from where Gandhiji launched the "Indian

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Opinion" and finally the famous Pietermaritzburg railway station where Gandhiji was thrown out of his compartment by the British who little realised then, by doing so they were in fact driving a nail into their coffin.

The final section of the book features "Anecdotes", which are a kind of fascinating fireside tales to the inquisitive folks. Suffice it to mention only one, "Miraculous Escape" where the author narrates her horror of escaping from Karbala in Iraq in Naqab (a sort of burqa) to avoid the wrath of the mullahs. The situation is similar to what V.S.Naipaul confronted during his visit to Iran. All these anecdotes help us understand the author's thinking closely. Even as there is a woeful note in her "Acknowledgements", an overriding aura of optimism is evident in all the chapters of the book, chiefly in "Abhi to Mai Jawan Hun" which celebrates some famous people who defied their age and remained quite youthful despite their grey hair. The author daintily writes how Beatrice Wood was fit as a fiddle on her 105th birthday ,Gladstone was a successful Prime Minister at the age of 83 and Goethe wrote his *Faust* when he was 82.

The author sustains her gripping style with unalloyed modesty. "As Prof. Gopi Chand Narang says in his introduction A life full of creativity, sensitive responses to the most exciting situations one could find in the world, all recorded with a sense of utter humility and objectivity...." Well designed and exquisitely produced with the graphic picture by Friedrich Grohe on the cover and illustrated with some rare photographs, the book excels as a compendium of memorable journeys. As literary sketches of memorable events the book stands out preciously in the domain of literature than just of travel writing.

Manohar Bandopadhyay

Satyr of the Subway: Urban Tales by Anita Nair, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2006; Pp.162, Rs.200/-

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What strikes one most about Anita Nair's stories is the subterranean undercurrent of violence that lurks surreptitiously in the background and rushes to the surface every now and then with devastating effect. This is not just a physical violence targeted at the body; it is a violence that nests in the deep recesses of the human mind and manifests itself in acts of unquestioningly

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playing out roles assigned by society, in desperate attempts to shake off one's past, in the enactment of one's sexual fantasies and in apathy and disdain for the old and the fallen. All these manifestations figure prominently in the stories of *Satyr of the Subway*.

Satyr of the Subway was first published by Haranand Publications in 1997. This edition, brought out by Penguin ten years later, carries the original twelve stories, some of them in slightly modified form, plus three new stories. Anita Nair, based in Bangalore and in Mundakotukurussi in Kerala, is also author of novels such as *The Better Man* (1999), *Ladies Coupé* (2001), and *Mistress* (2005). She has been translated into many languages all over the world and has become one of the more prominent figures of Indian English literature today.

Most of the stories in this collection are based in New York (though a few seem to be set in Bangalore). More often than not, they highlight the dehumanization that modern lifestyles, values and priorities have resulted in. "A Thanksgiving Tale" is a chilling example of this dehumanization. In a city where people escape their past with a change of address, the widowed Sarah has not learnt to let go. She calls her former neighbours, Mike (formerly Madhavan) and Yvonne on Thanksgiving eve, and wrangles an invitation to their party. She is snubbed at the party and returns alone, weeping, to her cold, lonely home, slashes her wrists and kills herself.

The cabbie who drives her home sees her crying all through the journey but does not interfere; he has seen too many incidents like this before and knows it is best to stay out of other people's problems—this apathy is symptomatic of a larger social apathy that leaves people to live out difficult lives and die lonely deaths on their own. "A Thanksgiving Tale" is an archetypal story of loneliness, of the desperation to belong, and of rejection. Sarah's presence at the party and her open admission of her loneliness is a reminder of the fate that lies in store for each of the others as they grow old; and that is a fate they would rather remain blind to, so cruel and intolerable is it. That is why she is snubbed and banished from memory.

Anonymity and erasure are the only alternatives to death for people like Sarah and Norah—'A month ago, I was Norah Webber. Now I'm Inmate No. 62, destined to live my life out among the senile and destitute' ("The Heart of a Gerund"). Once her mother dies, all Norah's relatives disown her and she decides to join up at an old-age home. One day, a young man comes visiting and takes her photograph. The photo wins him an award. A friendship blossoms between the two of them and for an hour every week, he makes Norah feel like the most wanted person in the world.

Finally, one day, Norah sees a newspaper clipping of the photograph.

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In it, she sees herself as 'an old woman who sits shrouded in loneliness, mumbling to herself.' The picture 'is the portrait of an old woman...the study of a destitute old woman with no place to go and nothing to do.' Her predicament is poignantly depicted in these lines: 'I feel betrayed. I feel ugly. I feel old and lonely and know there is nothing I can do about it. Except maybe shut the image out of my mind.' She realizes that she is perhaps little more than an object of study for the young man and refuses to meet him ever again—this is also her way of escaping her present. The photograph brings her face to face with the very fears she wants and needs most desperately to avoid in the same way that Sarah's loneliness brings Mike and his guests to confront their innermost insecurities. "The Heart of a Gerund" ends on a note of utter desolation and desperation: 'I try to sleep. What is there for me to do?'

There is also another strand of violence in this story—one that finds expression in Norah's own persona. Her resentment for her domineering dead mother mirrors Basil's resentment for his mother in "Satyr of the Subway". This resentment finds expression in her masochistic act of destroying her only precious possession—the Edward VIII Coronation breakfast set she had inherited. This smashing of her prize possession, the family heirloom, into a thousand fragments almost anticipates the way her illusions are shattered to smithereens towards the end of the story.

"Satyr of the Subway" is another frightening and very powerful story. It traces the narrator's fetish, his obsessive quest for the woman with the perfect navel. Loneliness is once again the defining motif in this story. Basil Bayleaf has no family worth the name. He has a job that is less than stimulating and is a would-be painter whose success has been rather limited. He does not even have any pleasant memories to moor him to the past—his relationship with his mother, the only other family member we encounter in the story, can at best be described as problematic; he is rootless and completely alone. Basil tries to seduce a younger Indian woman he meets in the metro and invites her over. But she ends up asking to be allowed to use the place for her sexual interludes with her lover, a married man. As an act of revenge, he drugs and rapes her, enacting his fantasies on her body.

The description of the incident highlights Nair's proclivity to fuse the violent and the lyrical into an organic whole—what makes Nair's prose so remarkable and disturbing is the unparalleled lyricism with which the first-person narrative recounts the incident (from the rapist's point of view). The element of defamiliarisation here packs quite a punch as the reader finds it difficult to associate the brand of prose used with the act that it describes.

Basil finally decides, 'I am not going to put her clothes back on her.

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I want her to know I have extracted payment. My deceitful darling, when you wake up, you will have a choice. To pretend nothing has happened and use my home as your love nest. Or walk away from this room and switch your subway timings. Make no mistake, I shall not change my route.' A final frightening climax to an unnerving story of loneliness and sexual violence.

The stories in *Satyr of the Subway* showcase the author's brilliant observation powers and her ability to wrench meaning out of every movement, every glance and every sigh: 'Yvonne could read the note of his footsteps. The patter when he was slight with excitement. The harsh clump when he was angry. The quiet reticence when he was hurt. The stop and go when he was unsure.' Her chiseled and tactile prose deploys every adjective perfectly tailored to its noun to create the most evocative, most chilling effect. The sexual violence of "Satyr of the Subway", "The Karmic Cat" and "Behe-Moth", and the fantasies of exhibitionism and voyeurism that are enacted in "To Touch a Rainbow" give her stories an added dimension. Her extensive and smooth use of literary and mythological allusions in her stories is also striking.

Sayantan Dasgupta

The Naïve Bird by Basanta Kumar Kar, New Delhi, 2006 Books India International. Pp.x+102, Rs.150, $4.95.
Footprints on the Sands by Rudra Kinshuk, Kolkata, Writers Workshop, 2005, Pp.32 H.B.Rs. 80, F.B. Rs.60.

Dawn breaks in an inevitable natural order of occurrence but does not usher in the expected or anticipated turn towards any simplistic or reductionist solution of dichotomous duality of earthly objects. This sense of duality keeps a poet's thoughts alive and progressive as a reality in his poetry. But, 'Between the idea/And the reality/between the motion/And the act/falls the shadow'. (Eliot: 'The Hollow men') *The Naïve Bird* is Basanta Kumar Kar's maiden anthology of poems. Kar has the thoroughness or an acute eye for the way that forms the binary duality which can be interpretatively expressive. A feature that impresses and ultimately convinces the readers is the poet's readiness to allow conflicting voices to be heard from all contending perspectives. It leads to a different sort of dialogue, that of the

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poet with his prospective readers. Kar's poems remind us of the fact that the poet is a medium between the real object and its experience.

Life envelops within its fold the solitude and transience of shared moments. A captivating silence preoccupies the poet:

> A sudden solitude
> Seizes the cloud
> Shatters hope. ("Shadow")

The sense of deprivation has made the poet a beggar for love knocking at the strangers' doors where he hopelessly hopes to receive it, at least in some small measure. In his quest for love, he has lost the way and is knocking at stranger's door in the hope of love. His quest for love is his quest for searching the self but he has created the worst situation in his life making it without love and pride. *The Naïve Bird* is a very sincere attempt to highlight the present state of the modern world marked by all-pervading violence, loss of values and man's basic helplessness.

The poet's private sense of loss and chronic despondency constitute the sub-text of his poetic process. The poet announces,

> My defeat is intolerable
> My loss is unbearable. ("Hard Face")

For Basanta Kumar Kar, misery in life is as natural as "Leaves to a tree." The personal experience of the poet regarding a specific place helps him see the lobe in a grain of sand, for the straw-like life could be a common phenomenon among companion in distress. The poet thinks, "Distance brings misery." ('To His Coy Naïve Bird') objective distance between human minds unfurls the absurd reality of men in this cyber age where each man is a single identity; he is single even in a crowd. Natural bonding among men is fractured; the fissures are easily visible. The poet's sensitive heart bleeds to think that man's shared moments of misery "disconnect natural bonding." ("Waiting")

> The poet says,
> Silence needs words
> Words need courage
> Courage needs conviction. ("Silence")

Silence like the horizon, is a always blur between what's real and what's not.

We can excuse the poet for "expressing the inner space spontane-

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ously." Kar pours his heart and the brain out to meet the offshoots: "the alphabets and the words". His poetic expressions are a compendium of strangeness added to beauty. His poetic journey is a sequel to certain objects as seen through a professional lens:

> Hungry for light
> Visible for a moment
> You look
> Through a professional lens ("Vanishing Light")

Time is the wheel on which the relation of man with an objective world rotates. Rising and ebbing is a part of life. The waves of horizontality of Time swirl. The poet gets involved in the process of the gypsy waves' of Time, as they wheel, while they "push and pull// revolt/ intimidating creation." (form "The Waves") The equation of life remains unsolved "in the stillness of time/knotte/ in a mysterious desire." (from "Wave and Time")

Poetry is the music of survival. Basanta Kumar Kar wishes to embrace the futurity of things through the "lexis unspoken":

> This is my wish
> I sail to future
> I'm with you forever. ("Branches")

As we go along Kar's poems there is a taste of alert alternative views that contribute to the ongoing poetic creation. He engages the readers with subtle and elusive elegance and takes us to the world where all that surrounds us is ready for the adventure and trust that accompany us on our journey:

> Dark blue sky and the sea
> movement of clouds
> waves of lost horizon
> thundering sea tides
> mirror each other
> like birds of a feather. (from "Bliss")

The muse of Rudra Kinshuk offers fresh and varied pictures of life with shades—dark as well as light but the linings of dark shades are more on his poetic canvas. The poet is more reflective than spontaneous in the depiction of life. Life manifests itself in his poetry in different shades:

> The web is labyrinthine
> but I'm no insect.
> Mine shall rename the fire. ("Renaming the Fire.")

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The body of his poetry consists of the physical, the concrete and the soul, the abstract:

> When the avenues in our city
> Are terrified, I wish to become
> A castle for chrysanthemums. ("Chrysanthemums")

The soul of his poems lies in the depiction of Life, Time, Love, Death and Hope while the body consists of man-woman relationship and the by-products of this relationship that include woman's despairing degeneration, man's morbid obsession, gross materialism, basic insensitive and, above all, the pain out of the death of moral values:

> Don't remove your white hands,
> Keep them ever on my forehead.
> My soul, a navigator,
> Looks for lost anchors.... ("Brimming Lakes")

For Rudra Kinshuk, life becomes a meeting ground between the physical world and the self, and his poems reach across that space we all feel when we pause and reflect what our lives mean. With precision of thought and lexicon the poet says,

> "I should decorate my cottage
> everyday I remind myself." ("Better Sleep")

Rudra Kinshuk builds up his discourse with fitting images and symbols:

> Only a man, lost in silence
> learned to light candles
> Form a camfire of some fairy tales. ("Solitary Dark-
> ness")

The metaphors and symbols of representations in his poems connect his essential identity as an emerging voice with the suspended feeling of poetic process. The poet seems to be more successful in shorter poems that reveals his process. His culturally specified connection with Santiniketan, the deep-seated value world based on Nature, creates a generic difference overriding his strength to develop into his own person and that leads to the fact that his poems illumine the experience of others.

In spite of a few repetitions and overlaps in themes, poems of both the anthologies under review offer delightful and provocative reading.

Jaideep Sarangi

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Bhattacharyya, Birendra Kumar (1924-1997). Well-known Assamese fiction-writer and critic and former President of Sahitya Akademi; authored more than 40 works which include novels, collections of short stories, collections of poems, volumes of essays etc.; his works have been translated into several Indian languages and English; recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award, Jnanpith Award etc. Address of his legal heir: Binata Bhattacharya, Kharguli, Guwahati 781 004.

Chatterjee, Debjani (b.1952). Poet, critic, editor and children's writer; translates from Bengali into English; has 16 works, which include, *The Role of Religion in 'A Passage to India'* (criticism), *The Monkey God and Other Hindu Tales* (prose for children) etc.; recipient of Yorkshire & Humberside Arts Writers Award, Art Council of Great Britain Award etc. Add: 11, Donington Road, Sheffield, S2, 2RF, UK

Choudhury, R.M. Dutta 'Sheelbhadra' (b. 1924). Assamese short-story writer and novelist; his novels inlcude, besides *Anusandhan, which won* the Assam Publication Board award, *Abichinna, Prachir* etc.; his collection of short stories, *Dayitwa Aru Anyanya Galpa* won him the Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad Award; several of his stories have been translated into English, Marathi, Telugu

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and Bengali; he is also the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for his short-story collelction, *Madhurpur-Bahudur*. Add: 1st Bye Lane, Guwahati 781 003.

Dasgupta, Sayantan. Is a Lecturer in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 700 032; has two books, *Indian English Literature: A Study in Historiography* and *Shyam Selvadurai: Texts and Contexts* to his credit; also translates from Bangla and Hindi into English.

Gill, Himmat Singh (b. 1938). English writer, reviewer and columnist; some of his important published works are *Ashes and Petals* and *The Commitment* etc. Add: H.N. 229, Sector 35-A, Chandigarh 160 022.

Hasan, Anjum. Indian English poet; has been published widely in journals in India and abroad; recently her work has appeared in the anthologies *Confronting Love* and *Reasons for Belonging: Fourteen Contemporary Indian Poets* (both by Penguin) and *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the North-East* by NEHU; her debut collection of poems will be published later this year by the Sahitya Akademi; presently working as Programme Executive, at India Foundation for the Arts, Tharangini 12th Cross, RMV Extension, Bangalore 560 080.

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Kishorekka, Anand. A young tribal painter and poet. Add: New Shanti Nagar, P.O. Gumla, Jharkhand.

Kohli, Suresh (b.1947). Poet, literary critic and documentary filmmaker. Has published four collections of poetry, one novel and edited several volumes of essays and short stories. Has translated extensively from Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi. Edited and published *The Indian Literary Review* from 1979 to 1990. Add: E-180, Greater Kailash Part II, New Delhi 110 048.

Krishnanunni P. Poet and critic both in English and Malayalam; teaches English in Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi. Add: 71-D, Pocket-A, Sukhdev Vihar, New Delhi 110 025.

Nambudiripad, Sobha. A scholar in clasical literature and a translator among three languages—English, Malayalam and Sanskrit; has translated two novels of B.M. Zuhra

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from Malayalam into English; currently engaged in the translation of the *Bhagavatapurana* into Malayalam. Add: Flat No. 9, Capital Garden, Poonkannan, Thrichur 680 002

Narayanaswamy, Chandramoni. Translates from Oriya into English. Add: Flat No. 006 (Block-B), Snehalata Apartments, Vivekananda Marg, Bhubaneswar 751 002.

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Parthasarathy, R. Poet, translator, critic and editor living abroad; has to his credit *Rough Passage*, a long poem and *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, an anthology he edited for OUP; his poems and translations have appeared in *Chelsea, Chicago Review, Encounter, London Magazine, New Letters, Nimrod, Modern Poetry in Translation* etc. Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize, 1995 and A.K. Ramanujan Poetry Prize for Translation; currently working as Director of Asian Studies, Skidmore College, 815 North Broadway, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866-1632, U.S.A.

Priyamvad (b.1952). Hindi fiction-writer with two novels and three collection of stories to his credit; *Anwar*, a well-received Hindi film was based on his novella, *Falgun Ki ek Upakatha*. Add: 269, Civil Lines, Kanpur (U.P.)

Radha, R. Painter, poet and art-historian; her works have been featured in several national group and solo exhibitions; recipient of Lalit Kala Akademi scholarship in painting; is Voluntary Coordinator of ANMPU Media Trust and script-writer of the internationally acclaimed documentary *The 18th Elephant-3 Monologues*. Add: Edathodam, South Eroor P.O, Ernakulam Dist. 682 306, Kerala

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Sahni, Archana. Indian English poet; teaches English Literature at Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab; has one published work, *First Fire* to her credit; recipient of First Agha Shahid Ali Prize and received

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Honourable Mention for E.J. Pratt Medal and Poetry Prize, University of Toronto. Email: archnasahni@gmail.com

Sarangi, Jaydeep. Indian English poet; Chief Editor, *Seva-Bharati Journal of English Studies* and Managing Editor, *Indian Journal of World Literature and Culture;* at present working for the UGC Research Project on Contemporary Indian Poets in English; teaches English at Seva-Bharati College, Kapgari, Midnapore (W), West Bengal. Add: 7/5 Bachurdeva, Jhargram, Midnapur (W) 721 507, WB.

Satchidanandan, K. (b.1946). Well-known Malayalam poet and critic; retired as Secretary, Sahitya Akademi; has published more than 20 collections of poetry, 16 collections of translations of poems by Indian and foreign poets, 17 collections of critical essays in Malayalam and English, and edited six collections of poetry (both in Malayalam and English); his works have been translated into several Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Gangadhar Meher Award, Kumaran Asan Award etc. Add: 7 C, Neeti Apartment, Plot No. 84, I.P. Extn., Patparganj, New Delhi 110 092.

Satpathy, Pratibha (b.1945).Oriya poet, translator and critic. Has nine poetry collections, six novels in translation, two works of literary criticism and two books of feature stories to her credit. Recipient of Visuva Award, State Sahitya Akademi Award, Sahitya Akademi Award etc. Presently Professor, R.D.W. Autonomous College, Bhubaneswar. Add: 11-4R Flats, Unit-9, Bhuabaneswar 22.

Sen, Bhaskar. Poet and artist; has two collections of poetry to his credit; held more than six solo shows and ten group shows in Mumbai and New Delhi. Add: 504, Aravali Apartments, Kaushambi, Ghaziabad 201 010

Shah, Ramesh Chandra (b.1937). Well-known Hindi short-story writer, novelist, poet and critic; has more than 38 published works to his credit; recipient of Shikhar Samman from Govt. of M.P., Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award, Calcutta etc. Retired Professor of English and Director, Nirala Srijanpeeth. Add: M-4, Niralanagar, Bhadbhada Road, Bhopal 462 003

Sharma, R.D. (Yuyutsu). Indian-English poet and publisher; has several collections of poetry, the latest being *The Lake Fewa and a Horse*. Add: Nirala Publications, 96-B, Krishna Kunj Colony, Laxmi Nagar, New Delhi 110 092 Email: yuyutsurd@yahoo.com

Srivastav, K.K. Poet writing in English. Add: Principal Director, Regional Training Institute, Bajaj Nagar, A.G. Colony, Jaipur 302 015.

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Swain, Rabindra K. (b.1960) Indian English poet with two collections of poems to his credit; translates from Oriya into English; associated with Jayanta Mahapatra's reputed poetry magazine *Chandrabhaga*; teaches at the Gopabandhu Academy of Administration, Chandrasekharpur, Bhubaneswar 751 023.

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Tsundue, Tenzin. Young Tibetan poet; has two poetry collections, *Crossing the Border* and *Kora* to his credit; presently working on a compilation of essyas on the Tibetan freedom movement; his works have been published widely in India and abroad; recipient of Outlook-Picador Award for Non-fiction in 2001. Email: tentsundue@yahoo. com

Unnikrishnan, N.G. Malayalam poet; also translates from Malayalam into English; has two collections of poetry to his credit; taught English in a college under M.G. University, Kottayam, Kerala. Add: Manasam, Kaitharam P.O., N. Parur, Krnakulam (Dist), Kerala 683 519 Email: unnikrishnan@yahoo.co.in

Vikraman, Manu (b.1963) Freelance translator; has two translated works including *Delhi-A Ve... from Yore* (Memoirs of Dr. R... Budhiraja in Hindi) to his credit... presently associated with Inling... International School of Language... as Senior Instructor (Corporate)... Add: F-85, Green Park, New Delhi... 110 016.

Zahan, Syeda Semim. An M.Phil. student in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi; translates from Assamese into English. Add: Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi 110 025.

Zaidi, Nishat. Scholar and translator from Urdu into English; Sr. Lecturer with Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi 110 025. Email:; nishatzaidi@hotmail.com

Zuhara, B.M. (b.1952) Malayalam fiction-writer and translator; has five novels, two short stories collections, five children works, one collection of interviews and four translation works which include *Kottaratheruvu* (translation of Nobel Prize Novel *Palace Walk* by Naguib Mahfouse) to her credit. Add: Maliyekkal, Malapparamba P.O., Calicut 673 005.

Corrigendum

The poems by Mayabhushan Nagvenkar in *Indian Literature* 236 are written originally in English by him. Ed.

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When Anne Frank, the most famous diarist of the twentieth-century, died in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in March 1945, she died in complete anonymity, stripped by the Nazi government of individuality and rendered as nothing more than one of six million Jewish men, women and children put to death during the Holocaust. But somewhere her diary lay in darkness, refusing and countering this sentence. The diary exclaims from every page that Anne Frank was not just a Jew. She was, like all human beings, a broidery of emotion, desires, failings and gifts, the complex details of a life. She aspired to be a writer, had a crush on a boy called Hello, a best friend called Hannah, and she loved and was infuriated by her mother in equal measure. In the pages of her diary, she states her dream that one day she and her family would be "people again and not just Jews."

A new book has come out in the best tradition of the *Diary of Anne Frank*. It is called *Stolen Voices: Young People's War Diaries*, spanning a period from the World War I to the recent Iraq War. Edited by Melanie Challenger and Zlata Filipovic and published by Arvind Kumar Publishers of Delhi, this inspiring collection of children's war diaries provides a compelling window into life during conflict. Heartfelt voices detail the fear, longing, hatred and angst we associate with war, but also the banality of daily life, as the 14 authors struggle to interpret their changing societies and cling to normalcy. It is interesting to learn from the Introduction how the diaries presented in this volume came to exist. Most young people who wrote these diaries were generally interested in reading and writing, and harboured ambitions of becoming novelists, poets or journalists once the 'dreadful' wars were over. Besides the opportunity they afforded to record daily events, these diaries also provided for their authors a refuge from the madness that surrounded them and became spaces for communication and self-expression. These diaries thus are both records and confessions while the process of writing is a method of transformation, allowing the young authors to assimilate and personalize events around them and beyond their control.

I fully share the belief of the editors that the diaries included in the book will "provide some depiction of what it means to be a young person growing up in the middle of war." We see war as an enormous and alien concept that is impossible to grasp. By getting to know the

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people who live through it, grow up in it and who share with us their daily fragments of war, we can break up the concept of war into smaller pieces and begin to understand what it really means.

* * * * *

Time to take leave. This is going to be my last Editorial for *Indian Literature*, as I am retiring from my services at the Sahitya Akademi on 31 st March, 2007 upon superannuation. Looking back, I came to join as the Editor of *Indian Literature* in 2002 from a rather high-profile job involving heavy charge of administration and management, relentless travels within India and abroad, constant liaison with top bureaucracy and publishing fraternity, organizing book fairs all around the country, tension of meeting stiff deadlines and such other things. Not that I did not enjoy the excitement of it all. I did. But my mind was craving for quietude, for going back to reading and writing, for meeting and spending more time with creative writers and for meditative moments of reflection. I must admit that the present job perfectly answered the description. Here I was given a small unit where, with my colleagues, I would set my own pace of work. As far as planning the issues is concerned, I did not set forth to revolutionise the structure; nor did I strive for any violent break with the past. I maintained the same format more or less, only made some value additions here and there and improved the technical input. So far as the content is concerned, I tried to maintain a balance between the established writers and the greenhorns and debutants. I retained most of the on-going sections, but occasionally added some new ones, like "From the Archives," "Masters," etc.

Of course, we tried to add some novelty to the thematic concept of the journal by bringing out a few subject-oriented special issues, for example, on travelogue, biography, autobiography, myth etc., rather than only language-based special issues. We also tried to break some new ground by highlighting certain important seminars by publishing, for instance, selected papers of the International Seminar on the *Mahabharata*, papers on Urban Legends from another important seminar, etc.

Going through umpteen number of unsolicited material, one would sometimes be amazed by the misplaced self-belief and disproportionate ambition of many wannabe poets and short fictionists. But at the same time one would often be delighted with a sense of discovery when one came across a wonderful piece bearing an unknown signature. My own realization from this experience of browsing through hundreds of pages is that many young men and women are writing much better poetry

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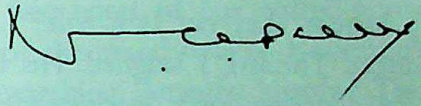
and short stories in English, but so far as the English translation of poems and short stories from Bhasha literature is concerned, much yet remains to be desired. One saving grace, however, is that one would often find highly engaging articles with critical and theoretical analysis of Indian literature having a comparative focus.

Anyway, I must place it on record here that whatever little I might have achieved by way of making *Indian Literature* more attractive, both in form and content, was because of the unstinted support that I got from my colleagues in the unit. I would also like to thank our readers, known and unknown, visible and invisible, who encouraged me by appreciative letters, phone calls, e-mails, words of mouth and above all by increasing the circulation of the journal.

As far as the authorities are concerned—the President, Vice-President and the Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi—they reposed absolute confidence in me, remained extremely non-interfering and gave me total freedom to work. This is the time to express my deep gratitude to all of them. I am sure, under their guidance, *Indian Literature* will continue to go from strength to strength in days to come.



Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

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On Tejaswi

U R Anantha Murthy

I had known Tejaswi since his college days. Aged 23 or 24, I was then a college teacher. Wearing a cotton suit, and silk tie I would go to college in a newly acquired style. Tejaswi, then 17 or 18, had joined the Shimoga College as he could not agree or yield to Mysore education. 'Sir, I have a question for you,' said Tejaswi once, calling me out and making me stand in a corner. 'You go to Bangalore every week for a haircut, they say. Is it true?' He had put the question jokingly, faking anger. Thrilled, I laughed. His liking for me had turned into anger and, also a lurking doubt, as someone mischievous had told him I was dandyish. From that day on, he came very close to the world of my heart. Gradually, I started telling him to read the books I had read. Without any hesitation, he would tell me: 'Sir. How boring!' There was never any dishonesty in the world of his feelings. A writer should never become a liar to sound charming or generous. If he does, his writing style becomes arty. Tejaswi the man was always pure in both his understanding and expression. Right from his student days until his death.

Two friends were always with him. One was Kadidal Shamanna (later a peasant leader) and the other, Shyam Sundar (later, a doctor). Madly fond of music, Kadidal Shamanna would make us laugh by making his teeth into a sort of musical instrument whereas Shyam Sundar would drink up a whole pitcher of water when thirsty. Tejaswi's companions were as strange as himself. Just as people laugh at their friends, Tejaswi was the type to laugh at his own characters.

When I came to Mysore—by that time I had married a Christian girl—I was in need of a rented house. A low-rented house from an unorthodox land-lord. Tejaswi got me one outhouse that belonged to one of his distant relatives. He would often come there in the morning and go on chattering till evening. We would double-ride the bicycle to

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the coffee house. He had come face to face with death once riding the same bicycle. The time was night and a lorry was coming from the opposite direction flashing its one eye. Because a single light was on, Tejaswi thought it must be a bicycle. He found it to be a lorry when it moved close. Suddenly he turned the bicycle in such a way that he came out unscathed. This miracle he shared with us quite frequently. It is this incident that came to my mind when I got the news of his death.

Tejaswi could resonate with everything. I was crazily fond of Lohia, which he too contracted. And then that most remarkable book by 'M' that narrates the daily activities of Sri Ramakrishna, used to be a topic of our conversation. I was very fond of Kuvempu's fiction. People like me had little faith in those days in the philosophy of his poetry. Tejaswi grew up in the company of those who identified with modernists (*Navya*). The spiritual world that surrounded his father did not have much of an impact on him. As he had known his father closely, he was aware of his great genius, his freedom from his blind admirers and detractors—a fact borne out in his intimate biography of his father, Kuvempu, *Annana Nenapu*.

When Tejaswi wrote a short story, "Linga Banda," while he was still a student, Gopalakrishna Adiga, a frequenter of our coffee house and a great Navya poet, who was critical of the grand style of Kuvempu's poetry called me and said: "You know something, Anantha Murthy? This Tejaswi has written a fantastic story. Just wait. He'll bring a new world to Kannada writing."

Tejaswi was a student when his father Kuvempu became Vice-chancellor. However, he was always free and natural in his unconventional behaviour as if he had nothing to do with the powerfully placed, but unassuming father. Kuvempu would hardly stay in the VC's official residence, but preferred to stay in his own house. In effect, the official residence of the Vice-chancellor became a free open-house choultry for the baggy pyjama-and-shirt-wearing Tejaswi and his friends. There they would wash and put out clothes for drying, for sleeping, reading and chatting and also for practicing on their musical instruments undisturbed. The bungalow had no neighbours to complain against the noise that music-learners make.

A good writer must be free from attachment to caste, class and position —unconventional and a-social virtues anywhere, and particularly so in hierarchical India. Tejaswi had them right from the start. We read avidly everything he wrote. He too used to read our writings. When I wrote the story, "Kartika" he said that it changed the way one thinks of what a short story is. He was younger than me. Often people younger

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than us do contribute to our growth. It was possible in those days. There were countless differences and arguments between Tejaswi and me in those days as well as now. All these opened us up to new learning, but never caused any bitterness or hostility.

Then came his book of short stories. Although I was reluctant to admit at that time, for I was also a target of his criticism, now I feel Tejaswi liberated Kannada literature from the excesses of modernism. He felt that modernism's symbolism and the way it opened up the unconscious, appeared to be going in the direction of self-obsession. This, I now feel, was quite necessary at that time for a new world to be opened up in Kannada writing.

It was Tejaswi who broke new grounds in the writings of those days. Lankesh and Tejaswi appeared to be the best writers at that time. Tejaswi also wrote a play and a novelette in the *Navya* mode which he was to abandon later. He wrote another book, *Vyaktivishishta Sidhdhanta*. In sum, he rejected all religious ritualistic fundamentalism, moving away from the half-baked spirituality of some *Navodaya* writers..

Those influenced by Ramakrishna Paramahamsa are, to my mind, free from fundamentalism of all kinds. Kuvempu had freed himself from it through Ramakrishna. So did Tejaswi, although he did not perhaps share the mystical insights that his father derived from Ramakrishna. Tejaswi's fascination was for modern science and its methods of enquiry. He was modern but in literature he abjured the modernist habit of constant soul-searching. Yet I feel his opposition to literary modernism came from the very womb of modernism. That is precisely why it was so insightful. In Tejaswi's writings, the dense world outside expressed itself without dependence on the author's discursive or psychological intervention. The writer is just there, hidden, so that the intricate details of the world can be revealed, often in a low-keyed, humorous way. It was realistic and, at the same time, symbolic because of his amused cartoonist-like perception. Yet another significant thing was that he loosened up writing so that it could take in more. He practised a kind of leisurely style, you could say. A leisurely style eminently readable and personal, for, he wrote as he spoke. Further, it also got the strength to see the world with wonder and fun, fun rooted in wonder. The familiar became unfamiliar in his wondering eyes.

He made the short story uncomplicated. He sometimes seemed fascinated with the bizarre and narrated uncanny events but at its heart the amused reader finds the author truly preoccupied with the intricacies and absurdities of the developments of our times. "Abachoorina Post Office" became a paradigm for many such short stories. The coming

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of a post office to a village is like the coming of the Central Government. But my own top favourite is "Avanati." It is about a most beautiful woman. But in the villagers' eyes, her sensuously attractive breasts contain milk capable of curing eye problems. There is also a great artist in the story, but he is a useful handyman and a carpenter. This story has all-India significance. "Avanati" could figure as a most important story in a national anthology, a true picture of all such decadent villages living on subsistence economy.

Tejaswi's novels are easily readable. But there are deep and inscrutable subtexts in his utterances. Because many subtexts keep peeping into his seemingly straightforward story-telling, they take on a kind of unselfconscious intensity and mystery.

I had a quarrel with him. A flying lizard appears in his strange and haunting novel *Karvaloh*. This flying lizard has a very important place in the evolution of the cosmos. A plain villager, unaware of the worth of such a thing, has knowledge about it. But it is a scientist who appropriates it. Tejaswi had such deep faith in science that he is not aware of the danger that science could rob people of all knowledge. It is like the U.S. globalizing and looting everything: this was my objection to the story which I had liked. Tejaswi knew about it. He was not the type to defend his writings after writing them.

He was not as critical of globalization as some of us. He used to say he would be happy if India becomes a caste-less society, as a result of our mass-media and the soap serials that bewitch our women. He wanted the perennial India to change at any cost. But he was also a great advocate of organic farming and translated Fukuoka's *One Straw Revolution* into Kannada. He fought for some time—until he got tired of power politics—for the empowerment of the peasantry in India with Dr Nanjundaswamy, a great crusader against Americanisation. There were contradictions in his thinking but as he was a great writer he could resolve them or confront them in his writing.

Like an elephant, Tejaswi made his own way. That precisely was his specialty. Unmindful of criticism, flattery or abuse, he dwelt in his own space. He knew very well that a writer always being with other writers was very dangerous. He mixed a great deal with the people of his hilly region who cared little for writing. Probably, he learnt to do this as much from his father who spent most of his time wandering in forests in his younger, rural days as from another great writer Shivaram Karanth. Karanth, who had visited his house, was also fond of him—for they both shared the love of natural science.

It is his spirit of adventure that makes him stand out among his

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peers. He was learning sitar too. He was deeply interested in photography and painting. He would wait days on end contemplatively to click the picture of a bird in the right angle for its characteristic expression. After taking the picture, he would start hunting for their names. He gave up the comforts of a job in a city after his Masters in Kannada literature and went into the Sahyadri forest to do farming and live amidst trees and birds.

Tejaswi, my contemporary, wrote books that people of all ages can read. Lankesh is always there in Lankesh's writings. But in Tejaswi's, the writer is not a character, but a wondering eye (This may have its own limitations for a serious writer). He probably got this virtue from photography. A wanderer in the pathless forests, he wandered through literature too, without bothering about any paths. He made a path where he walked. He could therefore see all that can be seen accidentally. A deliberate effort to say something does not accomplish a great work. But Tejaswi's was the kind of writing that would create a goal in the process of writing itself. His stories like "Kirugoorina Gayyaligalu" feature such characters that have no precedence in Kannada literature. There are villages and cities in the stories of Shantinath Desai, Yashvant Chittal and Devanur Mahadeva. Only Tejaswi's stories have mofussil places, a reason for his uniqueness. For, the inhabitants of mofussil places are often people with unusual talents. But they are deprived of opportunities. Hence their talents find outlets through crooked means. Tejaswi sees their thefts, mischief and pertness without judging. That is why I said: he does not come in his novels as a character, but as a wondering eye.

Once when I visited him in Mudigere, in his cardamom and coffee estate, standing beneath a tree outside, he went on and on about a stream in his garden which did not reveal its origin, its inscrutable wayward movements, the different forms it would assume on its path, on the whole, its cunning. He spoke as if he wanted to sum up the mystery of the whole world describing a mere stream.

"It must be a great experience to see the world with the belief that there is God. Equally great is the experience of the mystery of this world, if you are a non-believer.": I remember him telling me once. Or, did he say this? "While experiencing the mystery of this world, the question whether God exists or not becomes irrelevant."

At a time when the world is caught up in interpretations of faiths and sects, fundamentalism and terrorism, Tejaswi wanted, instead of leaning upon interpretations, to open one's heart to the world's mysteries. That enabled him to regard with contempt casteism, communal clashes and the politics of it all. He was one of us, often boisterous with his joyous

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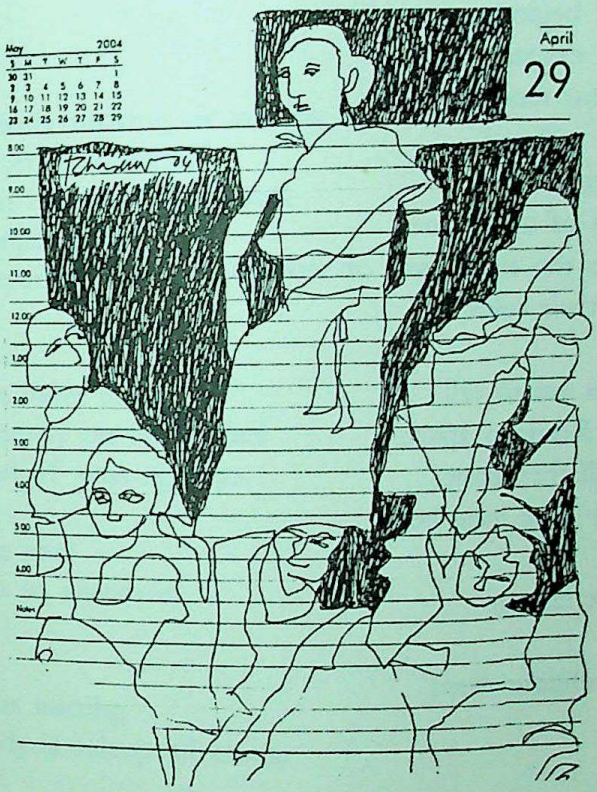
and spontaneous remarks, but he was also one who loved solitude. He would spend days quietly fishing or photographing birds, or wandering in forests as his father did once.

A writer who could ignite a sense of mystery in us has passed away, suddenly, after sharing a joyful meal with his grand children and the wife he loved and married defying caste. Thus he demonstrated to us in a mysterious way the impermanence of life, and also the joy of life which he celebrated in all his writing.

Translated by H.S Shiva Prakash ❑



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Anita Verma

To Women

When this century sinks in a short while
we must tone up the breed of
seed and grass,
we must reckon
right from the beginning
how much to expand
the lap of a lost tenderness
when we had suffered
numerous torments
and shed tears of many hues,
when we were the right kind of women
fitting in with their rules.

We are perhaps yet to tell
breathing and freedom apart,
and if this is all they have
then, well, they have long been
free indeed!
But can a mere change
in conditions
make such a sublime word
meaningful?

We must repose that limpid
golden river in the house of winds
where love is waiting on the banks;
we must grasp
the little finger of a child

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from the top of a hillock
yet to be lost,
and in tandem with a group
that is still alive in pain
we must dredge out
sparkling laughter,
the clean water of rivers,
and the sunlight-like mirrors
from the depths of our interiors.
May this return
be a return home,
which is large, quite large.

Translated from Hindi by Harekrishna Jha

Body

To watch a body moving or waking up
is nothing short of a marvel.
Though a seat of touch and smell
it is yet a medium of
something beyond.

A form indeed,
it has its own inner idiom.
It is awake merely on its surface
during the run of passing days.

Even then, its soul
is seeking out its vibration
all the time.

It's an anxious waiting
while the body is asleep all along.

Inside it reside many woods,
caves and interiors.

Somewhere deep inside lies love
in a dim light.

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And there are spots
where entry is forbidden,
we don't even know our way around
even if we don't believe in rebirth
the body can be true
in this very birth
when it sprouts up
and comes to be tender like petals,
when it is projected somewhere
entirely.

It is born at that very moment
it is extinct right then.

Translated from Hindi by Harekrishna Jha

Creation

I write up a body
whose soul is strung up
inside me,
and whose radiance,
like a drop of water,
flashes up
on the body of words.

And as soon as
the poem comes on,
a soul sheds its body.

Translated from Hindi by Harekrishna Jha

Beauty

The cascades rush down
the mountains of void,
streams flow within
the numerous streams of beauty.

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Hidden and gusting forth,
they evoke the-womb of the earth.
From this eye to that eye
from this mind to that mind
streams dance
in grass and cyclone,
there is an elation of children
in the touch of drops.

And here am I,
in the shivering love,
black river
and white lake,
still and lonely,
deep within the stream.

Translated from Hindi by Harekrishna Jha

Kiss

They were the grains of ice
that fell on hopes
and filled up
with their own desires.

The flock of lambs out then
in a pasture,
their eyes closed in the soft
glow of sunlight.

They were so close out of sheer
tenderness
like
a white ocean of breaths.
The grains were falling for death
between those lips

There were only two grains of light—
beyond the blue expanse,
was no human being.

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there was something like soul
perhaps,
perhaps not even that,
and neither space nor time.

Translated from Hindi by Harekrishna Jha

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Jay Goswami

Scientist

[If I knew that they (the Germans) would fail to build the Bomb, then
I would not have done anything which would go toward building the Bomb.
— Einstein]

I've written five pages
of the ante-death chapter.
Then I went far away
to loss from profit.

The concept was born
of distance from sea-water.
By that token we knew
that light does mean light.

I've written three pages
on the other side of light.
I'll give just one line to
its cruel lineage.

From each death comes cruel
profit to loss to profit.
Keep writing secretly
the ocean chapter.

Translated from Bengali by Ananda Lal

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The Sun and Wind

Sun, think once of the wind. He was running unto you
for ages. Yet couldn't keep away from the attraction of the earth.
Today you've brought him to bathe in front of the ocean radiance,
taking off his dropping, tattered clothes, you've given death
cleansed waves, fast moving. Sun, can you do so much?
What sort of man he was! He knew not even the name of whom he loved.
He was the sky-passenger. Countless plumage, of peacock floated away
spontaneously in the land of clouds.
Scarlet cloths flew away from so many roofs to roof space—
didn't take note of any thing. The heart of rains knows it.....Today
you've brought death cleansed waves high waves and finishing
bath and worship, you've expanded what a peacock's feather!
I understand that's why he passed, I understand that's why
his effigy remained left behind on the bank of the river
of this earthly life. O shore, sharpedged,
so much he's endured! How many times he's flown
unto you throughout the whole life!
Didn't look at others. Your mind knows if he needs to be scorched more
bringing him today to the end even.
He's written in the ocean pages only
of self. Whom he'd dreamt in a dream, let him never know the name–
He's uttered only in front of the sky-book, I'll love after death also...

Translated from Bengali by Kallol Choudhury

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Kallol Choudhury

Butterfly

I don't know how
a butterfly lay dead in my yard.
Splendid were its wings.

But little did the ants know of beauty.
They were in their hundreds
eagerly busy in a beeline
collecting food.

Ah, I thought, there's no museum here
where the butterfly could have been displayed
pleasing the eyes of viewers all.

And, that's how countless butterflies
perish
providing food for ants.

Translated from Bengali by Atulananda Goswami

Gandharaj

Uttering flower flower I go unto the flower
if the flower be the Gandharaj.[1]
O Gandharaj, for you I wish to be engrossed
in this awful world.

1. Gandharaj : a fragrant white flower

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For you sound sleep, for you flower thief.
So I cull the morning flower in the evening even.
Culling flower I wish to be engrossed in this world.
I won't remonstrate if I am stung by honey-bees.

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

Guava Tree

There's a guava tree beside my window.
In this tree some birds, variegated in colours,
swing daily in the morning and evening.
And they also chirp; sometimes, in the moonlit nights too
their chirping can be heard.
My home is small, small is its courtyard.
In it, one or two trees, now I am very fond of them.
It's fortunate that I planted the trees.
Only these trees show me
the swingling of birds.

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

Kargil

In the snow-capped mountain
the moon, it seems, swings in the crevices of earthly paradise.
A bevy of pigeons fly away in the moonlight-drenched love.
None comes from the other side.
But the gun-powder on the other side makes the air noxious.
Valiant heroes rush to save the country
in search of an untasted heaven.
The acme of patriotism adorn them
with the title martyr.

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

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S.Kannan

Madurai, Meenaakshi, the Murals

The shadow that moves near the sun-blanched banks
White flowers here and there
in the mist that spreads in the far-off mountains
Night seemed to be standing under the lush green foliage
left alone in the middle of the open fields,
to pass the day-time.

The flash of the wings
that are opened for the flight
The flash of the blue water
that splashes across
The flash in the oil that slips and slides down
the bas-relief on the stone

The stone's smell
smell, flowers
smell, the dust in the dry wind
smell, grime-saturated clothes
smell, a rusting away bicycle.

In between
She who stretches her hands towards faces
the one who hangs the bead-necklace from the other hand
under the grimy sculpture of the tower,
the ones who join the wings of a butterfly torn in the storm

The saree that fell into the Vaigai[1] flutters and frolics
and spreads out white clothes against the wind

1. Vaigai is the river that flows through the city of Madurai.

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Corn-ear
teak-flowers
the white of the drying up field
the Sangam[2] that flowered on earth
lie white.

Tree
face
the hands that planted and watered
the fallen granite columns
sleep blackening in sunlight

A mural is painted
the scene of an intimate battle
the arrows painted as flowers
the chained elephant
the perfect white of the tusk
the figure around which sculpted adornments are fixed
the infantry poured out in the picture overflow the confines.

The woman who draws the rangoli
the woman who adds colours
the woman who looks at her destined courtyard
For a female-companion on the left, another one on the right too
they painted exactly, bringing up the tally.

One growing eloquent about the toppled flower-basket
another talking about Shiva's direction

Under the grimy sculpture of the tower,
the ones who join the wings of a butterfly torn in the storm

The shadow that moves near the sun-blanched banks
white flowers here and there in the mist that spreads

---

2. 'Sangam' is a golden period in Tamil Literature and culture that flowered and flourished at least in three different phases over several millennia, the third and last of which is said to have been between 500 BC and 200 AD, when the works to which we refer as 'Sangam. Literature' were written. The seat of this Sangam was Madurai. The first two Sangams belong to the area of legends, having been initiated by Lord Shiva and Agastya Rishi respectively.

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Night seemed to be standing under the lush green foliage
left alone in the middle of the open fields,
to pass the daytime.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas

Interview:
(Poetry Bared)

Sir, you often say that a sex worker is to be considered like any other worker?

Yes, I do.

Sir, is there anyone of your relatives working in this trade?

No. As they are all engaged in some other trades, none of them have adopted this as a trade.

Your daughter?

She is doing a course for MCA in Bangalore.

How is she in writing?

I am paying attention to her writing. I select books for her to read (Smiles).

You are supposed to be a modernist. And yet, why this spittoon?

I am a complete traditionalist when it comes to wearing a mundu, chewing paan, and using this spittoon to spit into.

Good that it is a steel spittoon. Wouldn't it have corroded away, had it been an aluminium one?

Even steel will turn black after sometime. There's nothing to beat bronze.

What about medical aid to sex workers?

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They are all to be issued with watch-cards, which a doctor has to certify weekly, after check-up.

But, wouldn't diseases such as AIDS be contracted with a single contact?

Such people would have to be rehabilitated and kept indoors, ensuring that they do not venture out even once, and ministered to till their death.

The Naxalites too had contributed to society in an equal measure. What about their rehabilitation?

The work done by NGOs in that area is laudable.

How is it that you have a clear stance on every issue, Sir?

I don't know (Smiles).

Okay, Sir.

Thank you.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas.

Flash

Lips
two welts
Lips
worn
by the abrasion
of the kiss
sobbing
and coloured fire-red
by the scalding drops dripping
from the brimming eyes
Between the lips that quivered and parted
teeth shone white
The lamp-cast shadow that fell on its face

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has a skewered vision.
Desire is raised upwards
with indrawn cheeks.
The effulgence of the shooting star
that reflected on the quaking drop
and faded, still lingers
This is all that could be captured
before the shadows moved from
the oblong whose sides were
wrought by the lightning flash.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas.

Instruments

It would seem
the vadivaal[3]
is filled with remorse
seeing it lying down
after the deed is done
covering its shining blade
with red, oozing misery.
The gun isn't like that
It lies by the side of the one who committed suicide
like his own baby.
One feels
it would instantly spring up
and look up to its father's face.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J.Thomas

3. A slim sword that is concealed in a baton or walking stick; the baton or the stick is designed as the scabbard.

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Fort Kochi

Dead sea

In memory
life
mixed with lemon yellow
and water-melon crimson.

On earth
vacated mansions
scattered laughter
the dirty beseeching of the staircases
the porridge of flies.

The church
grumbling glance
Ash
in the mouth that opened to pray.

Wind

Plants

Fish that dream
about the curry-dish

The backwater said to the sea:

O wanderer
you haven't yet learned
to live in the resounding
interior monologues...

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas

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Krishna Mohan Jha

A Village Called Jitpur?

1.

Feathers dropped in the bamboo thicket
yearn once more
to fly in the sky.
A ball lost there
wants to be thrown up
as high as it can go
and come down again on earth's soft lap.
Names hollered look down the well
and hold tight the hope
of not losing their renown.
In that same place goes a worn-out
road staggering into a Kali temple
and tapering into a snakehole.

The final bleating of the goats
intertwines in the air
with the rustling of peepul leaves
and the flapping of the flags.
Kali's red eyes and tongue soaked
in the incessant flow of blood
on the surface of the water and on the ritual flowers
fills the children with stunning awe.
Jackals are on guard lest even one drop of blood
fall to the ground
as if they were reassuring the village
that there's still time
there's still time

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So an old man dangling by a final thread
sinks into his life, squeezing a coin in his trembling hand.
Young women, like budding paddy,
still look far down the road.
Their pots cooking rice
repeat the names of the departed.

2.

Jitpur is the name of a village
a scar on the face of the earth
two miles from a blackish river
that flows as if it were a tear.

But for flora lost in local lore
and footsteps echoing on the wind
no one knows this river arose
when the earth split for Sita.
The river's colour isn't made
of Mithila's pride but its lamentation.

After waking the rest of the world,
before the future comes on the oxpath,
the river's solitude and suffering
suffuse every home on the tails of buffaloes,
and on the shepherd's flute
crickets stand guard.

3.

This village could have also become
a temple to the Goddess of the Forest
where on special occasions jackals
would come and eat sanctified food
and dogs would lift their legs.

This village could have also become a market
where you would have slipped on a banana peel
and thrown out your back

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Sleep too this village could have become
in which a travelling man
fell into a headless well
and became the hero of a folktale

When it's decided to erase with the spray of buffalo's pee
words as they are being written on the slate,
then what difference does it make
if Jitpur had become something else!

4.

If Jitpur had become something else,
then the water of what lake or pond would a bird
descending from the Himalayas
dye with its blood?

Every night, all night the murmur
of children crying
would come from what
village's acacia grove;
all day long the people from where
would sing their lives away
in an ear-splitting kirtan?

Where would that corner of the world be
where an endless tunnel took the place of the sky
which slept with a baby goat under a basket?

If Jitpur had become something else,
then two years after my birth
where would I have gone again and again
to find the woman who had gone to bathe
in the creek and had not yet returned?

5.

After wandering through innumerable
villages, hamlets, towns and cities

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I return like a dog
that had eaten the door's dust.

I ask the blue sky to return
the flying of my kite,
the neem tree for its shade

Cowering in the blazing afternoon,
sleep for the promenade of innumerable stars,
and the threshold for the sound of my name.

Digging into the shoulder of an ox
startled, a crow flies away;
lying underneath a cot a dog
growls unmoving;
bathing at the well
women modestly cover themselves.

Beneath the acacia and the bamboo
and some flowers swaying in my memory
I scream my name to prove
my own existence.
But in the language only I know
I become even more alone.

Translated from Hindi by Robert A. Hueckstedt

Sarangee

Maybe the man who discovered this sound
was deaf from birth
and spent years wandering from jungle to jungle
searching for his own voice

Or, to pay for transgressing a royal decree
his tongue was sliced off
and the writhing of his pain-wracked body
rose up to his mouth and came out unformed

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Or, as inconsequential as a snail,
a tidal wave tossed him onto an island of destitution
and the cry of his frothing heart, trembling
broke on his every breath

Or someone who lost his home and loved ones
discovered this sound with his weeping.

In this unfathomable life
are so many occasions of rupture and loss
that the mother of this sound's birth could be anything,
from the death of a bird to the razing of a slum.

So
in honour of the humanity of those
who have endured only grief in their lives
bind up your loincloths and listen.
This is no musical instrument irrigated by the ascending scale of happiness.
It is a glacier of misery built up over centuries
now slowly melting in its own passion.

Translated from Hindi by Robert A. Hueckstedt

The City No Book Knows

One day everyone must go
to that city no book knows.

No map has it
No meteorologist can estimate its temperature
Logic cannot fathom its way of life
No visitor from there
can tell you about it.

Without suitcases
any arrangement for the fare
or any knowledge
of the language there
innumerable faces set out on their way
trembling through the haze in the distance.

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Only three days left before
the son's head-shaving,
the daughter's wedding delayed
like the arrival of Death,
Brother unable to land a job,
everything here and there
up in the air

To the point that the vegetable dish
cooked in mustard oil and green peppers
remains untouched

The wash still hangs on the line
the promise to meet has been broken
the thing that should have been returned
sits right where it was.

One day we too
will take off this body like a dhoti
sit quietly in an invisible vehicle
and set out on our journey
for the city no book knows.

Translated from Hindi by Robert A. Hueckstedt

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Mohan Thakuri

Mind

My wings,
painted and studded
with innumerable self-oblivious colours
of imagination
and rainbow.

I exist blue sky
the sky I am, blue.
Up above
I stand
a crowning dot
on the summit
of indomitable aspiration.

I exist a deep sea
of secret possibilities
A deep sea
calm for some moments
and rippling most of the time.

A Kangsa of quarrel
a Krishna of compassion
a Dushshasan of impudence
images of love
renunciation of the Buddha
such as these I am.
So I am.
In the sky of fancy
a boundless flight without airship

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I am ahead of words
ahead of words I go.

Ever there's the frolic
of a maiden's youth.
Spring season every time
even in the wrinkled face.
Discontented always
despite countless gains.
I am the cause
of hellish misery
and I myself am
the way of salvation.
I am Ratnakar
as well as Balmiki.

No moment of rest leaning against time.
No meditation.

I hear
again today
the subtle tinkling
of Menka's anklets.

Translated from Nepali by Manprasad Subba

The Sky and the Earth

Sky knows no bound.
Unrestricted expanse,
called it the fathomless sky
for its boundless expanse.
Like the inconsistent interpretation of Ether
something intended to be done
by the bluish tinge.
Like the priest—
Like the pastor—
to an unexplained vastness
to a mysterious sensation

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called it—the sky
also clenching a meaningless life—
Clad on the head—the emptiness of sky,
we've been so—
praying emptiness
without being aware of.

And the earth—
not too much exaggerations,
nor any denial,
caressed with the heartfelt love,
in the live spell of time,
has a temptation to see incessantly—
the lofty heights of mountains—
Guransh[1] in the verdant hills
and *Krisknachuda*[2] in the plains—
songs of streams,
so we are enchanted
Of course, the slashed land slopes
The amputated tree-branches
are the pains of bruises
Painful wounds, many injuries are there,
but the toleration implies the earth,
Not so many desires—it has,
but it can wait, the old refugee of Pearl Buck—
For a handful of seeds
even when—by any reason
it has to remain barren.

Translated from Nepali by S.M. Rai

1. Rhododendron
2. Gulmohar

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Naina Athalye

Jesus and the Street Child

She is hungry and peeps into the dustbins. Her beautiful eyes know when the other
children have dropped half-eaten cookies. A typical day when life is about survival
surviving hunger, escaping lust and of course the police.
He pulls at her plaited hair and she screams in pain. Another skirmish and another child
on the street trying to live,
Her life is about suffering for our sins.
Like the man on the cross
her life is about making us feel good about ourselves.

Like Mira...

The world I have created is so beautiful.
In it is you and your thoughts and the strength that comes from it...
A mirage they say you are—
Not attainable and yet Mira's Krishna finally took her home
I am not like her but I see traces of her madness in me.
I wait and I love and I am transformed to love all as my own.
I am not as fortunate as she because I sometimes doubt. She met you as a child and I
crossed your path as a grown woman.
I know you are my beloved and yet I ask
Are you my very own God? Should I settle for something less or maybe more?

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Soulmate

Another day and six months go by. Not one moment have I forgotten your name or your eyes.
Where do I go in search of you? Do you miss us like I do?
I never see you except in my heart where I know that you will never die.
For that matter, I will never die.
I died the day I knew the truth and being alone in the knowing that you and I are meant to be always together.
Death will come again when I am not prepared, although death is thrilling not like living
where in the struggle called life everything is measured, hopes laced with disappointments, childhood coloured by tears and love tarnished by lust but in death I will go to Bhagwan and maybe meet you there.
Who says love needs space?

Like Love

In loving you, I learn to love God
In loving you I learn the futility of my "I" ness
In loving you I learn that this pain masks the ocean of true love
Loving you is easy only when we cease to be ourselves and become the stars, the moon and the vast compassion-filled universe.
Loving you makes me deathless and having met you, I know, that life will never be joyless.

❑

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Pankaj Parashar

Bodh Gaya

On his way from Sarnath
Lord Buddha crossed the Ganga
whispered
the boatman
no more 'Bodh' in Bodhgaya

In Gaya passed away Gayasur
Ajatshatru in Magadh
His eternal foe
surrounds him still
Doubt and suspicion
suspicion and doubt,
mock him still

Change a prefix or a suffix
the word changes, the world changes
Read Him forward he is 'God'
Reading Him backward makes Him 'Dog'
But the truth still stares
The fact remains
No more Bodh in Bodhgaya.

Translated from Maithili by the Poet

Time: The Denominator

Nothing is visible
in the darkness

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I quietly scan
again and again

Swarms of code words
swarm around me
keeping a vigil
a watch over me

One fine day
the words in my diary
suddenly change,
so do their meanings

Where the writing pad once stood
now stands the 'phallus'-'Shaligram'

Later one day
my creations vanish
My complete and incomplete
poetic outpouring
the living witness of my innocent feeling

Since several nights
comes wafting a cry
RAM NAM SATYA HAI
RAM NAM SATYA HAI
God Alone is Truth
Truth alone is God
In the tone of a lullaby
A chorus is sung

The last rites' mantras
are called didactic ditties
In a chorus resounds
A prey
A prey

In the darkness
masked men in medieval dress
with modern weapons
demolish the image of the Buddha

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I see
the earthquakes in horror
Different men of different 'isms'
hurl abuse in different tongues,
keep shouting
democracy, democracy

I see
I hear

How Strange
How amusing
in an age of blank verse
in an age of unheeding
come slogans in
rhymes and alliteration.

Translated from Maithili by the Poet

Bag on the Peg

Father
wherever he came from
hung his bag on the peg
went to the well
to wash away
his thirst, hunger and fatigue
and dust

The bag on the peg
disturbs him again and again
makes him restless again and again
gets him ready again and again
forces him out again and again

The bag on the peg
used as a napkin
to wipe away his sweat
is turned into an air bag

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To stuff his clothes
towel and snacks
when he travels afar

The bag on the peg
when he holds in the hands
radiates a festive gay
in the wrinkled face of my father
On the day mother is busy,
grinding 'masala'
sister is busy cooking rice
grandma with her laughter
sounds sweet as the flower
a crowd of birds
keep hoping in the yard.

The bag on the peg
was a mystery unsolved?
We stood on tiptoes
on the narrow stairs
on each others shoulders
We stood
–to peep and pry
see and find
inside the bag on the peg

The bag on the peg
had a hundred wholes in it
like the innumerable cracks on his feet
Things in the bag could be seen
in and out
like father watching the time

The bag on the peg
perhaps it reminded him
of the birds that left their nests
for their little offspring
to return in the evenings
Of going to bed early
rising and leaving
before daybreak

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Bag on the peg
denoted father's presence
which made children silent
women talk in whispers
and sister humming
only Vidyapati instead of film songs
Thus, in this bag democracy of ours
The bag empowered the big boss

The bag on the peg
is still there on the peg
in the same place
in the same room
But the 'Nehrus' and 'Jinnahs' of the house
did not pay heed
to the father (of the nation)
as was expected
The houses stood divided
Father was shaken like Gandhi

The bag on the peg
still hangs there
It is now treated
not even as a 'Saint in Letters'
nor even as a God of the 'Pariahs'

My wife put her foot down
I'll use the bag
to dry the dishes my wife said,
to dust the cycle my son said
to make a soft bed for my doll
my daughter said
But I stood firm
never allowed the bag
to leave its peg

The bag on the peg
and me on the bed
cried and cried
all night-long
like a new bride
leaving her home

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Thank God no one
raises the issue of the bag now
The bag is on the peg
reminding me of Father
swinging and reminding
of his presence everywhere.

Translated from Maithili by the Poet

Abbot

Panting and panting
short of breath
speeding her way
clutching closely her baby for six
at last stood she at the door
of a Buddha-Vihar
hopefully, knocking

She stood knocking and knocking
hoping and knocking in vain

How many doors
how many days
how many nights
how many times
had she knocked, knocked, knocked
only in vain

A woman stood
facing an inquisition
answering questions
fired by a battery of Bhikshus
scandalized, scared tirelessly
proving time and again
her chastity, her purity

In the endless cycle of life
between life and death
between murder and suicide
she passes through

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tests numberless
of ice and fire
Like a Commodity
she is for sale
sold from one hand to another

In the market place

From the slave trader Partul
to Bhudhar Sharma and the priest Chakradhar
slave Divya
like a mute animal
is sold everyday
passing from hand to hand

How ironic it does seem
what bitter constraints
though a human, yet not considered so

To protect her child
breathless and panting
she reaches for refuge
at the Buddha-Vihar
only to be refused

Abbot!
One who has lost her partner in life?
And her father too
with a babe of six
who will she seek
for refuge
or to slave away
her life

Abbot oh Abbot!
How funny it sounds
she thinks she is one of them
but the world think she is not
one of them
she is not part, but apart from them

Translated from Maithili by the Poet

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Ph. Sanamacha Sharma

Limitation

Snoring city. Its big and dark nostrils
quietly exhales out the warm rotten air.
And the dawn knowingly trusts its knife
in the back of the sleeping hope
and disappears in the nearest alleyway.
The sun stands in the witness box of the city
without any fear, without any shame,
and washes off its blood-stained hands.

And all night you spent sleepless the camera of
your soul clicking a hundred poses of faceless dreams.
The day stands bare in front of you
now like an arm-raised, half-clad model.
And the city gets up and like a row of
smart, glib vendors, get down to its business
of selling dreams like cheap watches and trinkets
with gimcrack promises of undying faithfulness.

As you fix yourself at the same table in the office
of the private company, why do you feel
as if you are falling down inside a lift, alone?
As if life here is nothing but a gaily-wrapped
miniature time-bomb ticking with ambition?
Now sadness seeps down on you like instant-coffee.
And throughout the expedition of day you carry
the undeveloped roll hiding in your empty heart.

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Beware

Our chewing cum love makes us smile now.
Our heart like the mouth needs something
reasonable or unreasonable, bitter or sweet,
to engross itself.
But as we chew our love, we often chew into each other.
I know, here, slimy desire like mortar,
stirred by the hired hands
of the laborious dreams, are used to plaster
and set up each bulky-little bricks of city.
And sometimes the warm, beating soul
ends up in the cold grip of concrete fingers.
But the question is (before the flavour is over):
In this congested business of survival
can we squeeze out between our thin lives,
between our part-time careers,
a balloon of bond without bursting it?
Am I asking a lot from both of us?

Door

The impersonal bed in the hired room
waits for a moment of instant *moksa.*
Are we both trying to reclaim love
zipped inside the safety of a loaded wallet?
Is that why we disrobe each other's lives?
Write our private history in sweat and sighs?

We think we can articulate that long denied
phrase inside the breathless suffocation
in the back seat of dark-glassed secret.
Living in the other side of the soul,
temporarily speaking the primitive language
we think the door may click open the next moment.

We think we grasp those purchased peaks of life.
And all this time we are like foolish customers
trying to recover love in the bottom of
waste basket. And the knotted condom

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With forgettable memories of unheard moans and
of intangible fantasies, still seeks salvation.

But the door remains closed and the room un-let.
You must have seen those Buddhas, expensive/cheap,
brass/mud-made, displayed for sale in the flea-market.
I shall gift one to you someday if you like it.
We can keep it inside the showcase like others.
That way, perhaps, we can avoid the door altogether.

At the Butcher's Shop

The butcher smiles welcomingly through
the pink meats hung at the window.
Squatting in his favourite position
sharpening his knife, says, "Sir, fresh meat:
Fresh pork. Fresh mutton. Fresh chicken."

He has a few pleasing phrases for
all kinds of clients and he remembers them all.
This is the kidney. This is the leg-rib part.
They come and go taking kg and kg of meat,
Exchanging notes and coins smeared with blood.

City-teeth love them: deep-fried, roasted, smoked.
Evening warms up in the aroma of fried onion,
ginger and garlic. Night expects a filled-stomach sleep.
While, outside the butcher shop those half-fed chickens
inside the cage still squeak and wait for their turn.

Reading Magazine

Various tongues, eyes and grimaces, stick out of
the glossy cover pa e trading fictions
foretelling fulfillment of assorted wishes of city-lives.

Open it. I locate your different pretty faces
in glossy papers in camera-correct positions
and contours (or distortions) of many expressions and moods.

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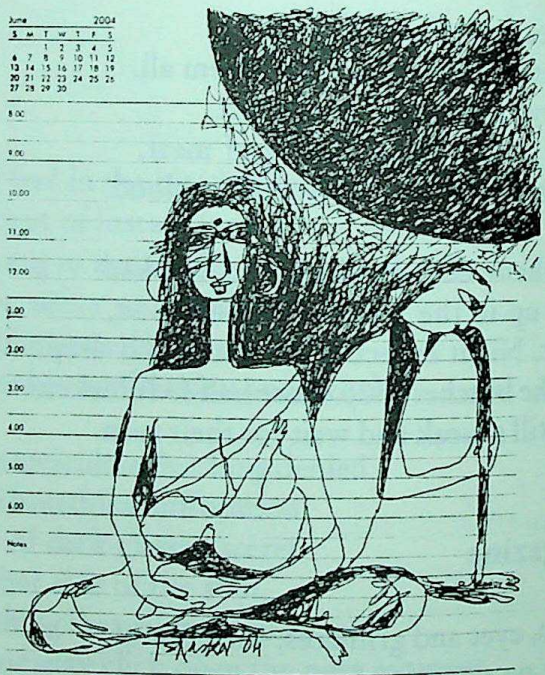
Glamorous dreams wink at me lying on the couch,
in skimpy tank-tops, in mini-skirts,
showing their fleshy cleavage, their thunder thighs.

Soon I discover myself (despite myself)
neck-deep in the reality of counterfeit living,
just another lie in the swamp of your lies.

Your pages keep on adding nonstop everyday.
The more I go inside the more I find life
lonely like a poem, lonely like love among bitches.



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Rita Malhotra

Mask

a house on the river
waves lap at the door
red grass smiles tall

sunrise brush-strokes paint purple
diamonds glitter
on noon's proud chest
radiant peacocks open petals
winged dahlias in twilight bloom

earth bathes in a rain of stars
chirping birds perched on moon
rainbow across the night sky

all unseen, unheard,
beneath
the masked surface.

Phenomenon

the poet turns
wilderness to gardens
trapped sometimes in
the endless chaos of life's aberrations
he implodes in metaphor of time
in similies
of dumb wrath
blind to truth

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to light
to darkness
lost in the war of creation
and destruction.

Sold

guilt creeps in as
the broken mirror reflects
ruthless desire
in the morbid half-light
of the dingy room

henna yet to dry
virginity huddled in surrender
she is a fragile bloom, fresh
in a dark cellar

under a faded innocent skirt
the brown skin perfect
the only asset of a family
imprisoned in poverty
for years uncounted
she was sold in marriage yesterday

a liquid ache under her skin
spreads insidiously
as he advances
wearing an ugly smile of anticipation
his cold confident virility
a sharp contrast to
her tragic trembling lips

music of falling rain
in the window pane
in discordance with
helpless screams
she had just lived her first death

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Land-sea-land

baby jasmine nestles warm
in earth's embrace
in the fragrance of its motherhood
nestlings fly to conquer skies
return fatigued to waiting arms
to her lullaby

her divinity follows destiny's path
patient, smiling, through nature's fury
the thirsting sun's plunder
of man's relished evil
disfiguring, devastating

silent, she absorbs convulsions of history
then echoes bloodshed
that decimated peoples
she veils dark memories

beyond the dark memories
night descends in golden splendour
with sounds of the conchshell,
land and sea become one
sins float away
feminine desire flows
in unconcealed affirmation of love

tomorrow the ocean will reach out again
and touch the heart of earth
as devotees carry offerings
of rice, marigold petals, earthen lamps
on banana leaves
and float their prayers
to the Ocean-God.

Baba

disturbed dreams
rise from ruins of sleep

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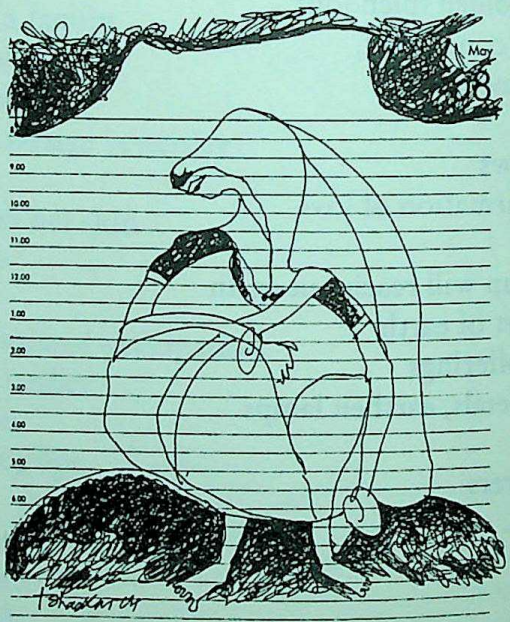
dark walls close in
I cling to my aloneness

burning incense sticks
stand lyrical beside
fragrant flowers
as baba's eyes gaze through
the sandalwood frame

today time separates us
today we inhabit dual worlds
disjoint
but every night
he comes to me
as a silent tear



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Sagari Chhabra

Iraq War

Wrapped in a shroud
the man in the coffin
lay buried under
a clod of earth,
his spirit hovering
incessantly;
a cloud pouring rain,
asked, why
the Iraqi children
were crying out
in horrific pain?
The essence of camphor
questioned the existence
of chemicals,
when the entire world,
(Blix* included)
had cried,
"No war!"
The sea splayed angrily
against the rocks,
mangled flesh and armoury
seething within its debris.
The moon waned
its luminous glow,
unable to bear
the continual flow,

* Hans Blix - the United Nations weapons inspector who said before the invasion there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

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of blood
on earth;
there were no dearth
of voices from cyber space,
crying, 'colossus brute
watch your pace!'
But you strode on
—unfazed;
the smell of oil
a perfect foil
for your plans.
Slowly, you reduce
land to territory,
a people to subject,
creating minefields
in minds;
white doves flutter helplessly
as your men embark
on an anarchy,
a scarring of the psyche,
that history will never forget
nor the people ever relent.
And the night lay
engulfed in sorrow,
awaiting a greater dawn
tinged with a pink hope
in the morrow,
when the diminished people
would rise,
spelling the demise
of power;
to this hour,
the sun dedicated
its bloody sunset.

An Iraqi Girl Speaks

I am a little girl,
I knock on your door
at midnight;

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there is nothing
to be scared about,
for I am only nine.
I died in Iraq
with burns
beyond degrees three,
so they stopped grading me.
It was the first time
no one scolded me
about my grades.
I never went to
my high school farewell,
I never saw the world;
I come to you now
from the nether-world.
I knock on your door tonight,
asking you to not
blanket bomb those
who are already shivering.
I ask you not to nuclearise
the world in the name of detterence,
I don't know what detterence means,
I never went beyond grade five,
I would have loved to study
but you see, I'm not alive.
I ask you not to fear
living in high rise,
but to surmise,
what it was like for me;
I am one of those
you call 'collateral damage,'
buried in the ground,
amidst the worms and red ants,
I can't tell you what democracy
I've found.
At school,
I loved to sing,
'oranges and lemons
sold for a penny,
all the school girls
are so many,

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the grass is green
the roses red'
remember
me,
for
I
am
dead,
dead,
dead....

Hunger

It was the year of euphoria,
they announced;
'we have sixty million tonnes
of food grain in reserve,
(when we need only twenty)
and nuclear bombs too,
for these ensure
peace and plenty.'
When starvation deaths
were reported in Orissa,
the suave minister's insight
came across a television byte;
'they prefer to eat
mango kernels
instead of grain,'
and I refrained
from saying,
there was not
a kernel of truth
in his words.'
When men,
women and children
died in Rajasthan,
they said it was
the drought,
wrought with
the commotion

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the right to information
agitation had created;
after all there was
food for work,
but the toiling masses
had learnt to shirk,
the duty muster;
so unrest was all
they could fester.
When tribals
died in Jharkhand,
the Communists
issued a communique;
'Smash the food bins
in every taluka!
Grab your rights!'
I sent the Politburo
a wire;
'What if some innocent
dies in the line
of police fire?
Why do you not
feed the hungry,
atleast in the state
you reign in power?'
It must have been
an unholy hour,
for they replied;
"Pay us the economic costs
of transporting grain,"
and I was drained
of all logic
I went from
seminar to seminar,
between luncheons
of multiple courses
deciding the right
course of action,
after all nobody
wants to create
a faction,

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within the
development circuit.
They said;
"you sermonising
little girl,
why don't you
learn to go hungry
for a while?" I did,
till they advertised
every pizza, with
'Hungry Kya?'
They said;
"What do you know
of hunger,
you little bourgeoisie?
You sell feelings
of the poor
to the rich,
you like to sandwich
all that you can
consume and take,
make no mistake,
you are part of the
consuming elite."
Then they sipped.
their gin and tonic,
in a manner
so vitriolic,
yet, so effete.
I hungered to speak,
but my language
lay in hyphens,
like a stomach distended,
bloated when empty,
my words just floated....

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Smriti Rekha Das

Spiralling on a Winding Street

Spiralling on a winding street.
Closeted inside a cab
by the squire window....you view
bright merry autumn morn
in bright yellow attire
warm, welcoming
the vast expanse of blue-white chequer'd sky
light, lofty ethereal flights of clouds
the green girdle bracing you
dahlias in sprightly dance
cosmos hails in gay reels
the golden stretch of marigold
the vastness of bliss
the immanence of green
a myriad colours of flowers
encircles you.
You repress a tear
not of sadness
but of fullness
the very heaven is with you!

Dew Drops

Fondly I wish to feel Thy Pulse.
The trees afar feel the drift of Thy Wind.
They move, dance, rock and swing
Keeping perfect beat with Thy rhythm
Thy morning sun shines golden on the leaves

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Twilight touches them with crimson hue
and when evening comes
they wear Thy black eyelashes.
Night leaves, no barrier 'tween Thee and Thy trees
And they lie deep asleep in Thy embrace.

Shelter'd in the brick-house
then in the bodily frame—
flesh, blood, nerve, bone and fibre—
all too thick, impenetrable to feel Thy Pulse.
The toughest is the house of self.
Hous'd in so many houses
I miss the bliss of Thy presence.
I've faith entire,
not the deluge of Thy Grace, My Lord!
Dew-drops would suffice mine!

Human Bond

One fine winter morn
clear blue sky, crispy weather
horse-hoofs rang clear
four of us were on
to visit the Darga at Ajmer

Bouquets of roses, Rajnigandhas
incense sticks, sweets,
we bought from a shop
beside the Darga gate—
to make holy offerings.

Not a thick crowd
in glittering jaris and garlands
the holy tomb laid.

A sudden heart-rending cry
...a sure prayer from a wounded heart
of loss, bereavement
took me unawares.
Torrential tears

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did that moment overpower
my senses.

Unknown travellers from two distant corners
in deep emotion deluged
in single identity merged
Mothers, they were, tied
in tears of no colour.

Pain, deep pain, melts iron-bands
pain is the catalyst... elevates
the gross to enlightened humanity

Pain, catastrophe is a mortar
that grinds vanity
of class, creed and colour
strips man of animality
to join the mainstream of humanity .

Noh-ka-Likai[1]

Heaven fans your bereaved bosom, Likai!
Ever-wailing in a veil of grief,
Shroud the vision of the viewer,
to the hideous slaughter
of the life of your life,
heaven was struck with terror.

If ever you lift the veil for a breath
what a crystal-clear mirror
of motherly love flowing forever!
Heaven could not but descend

1. Noh-ka-Likai at Cheerapunjee, Meghalaya is an attractive tourist spot. The falls derives its name from a popular Khasi folk-tale. Likai's second husband killed his step-baby during her absence. On her return, she ate the meat prepared by her husband. When she went to take Kwai (pan) in the betel-nut container she found the fingers and toes of her baby. Wild with grief, she ran out of the house and from the hilltop jumped and committed suicide in the falls. "Noh" in Khasi means to commit suicide by jumping. Since then the falls came to be known as Noh-Ka-Likai Falls.

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because your heart was rent,
heaven keeps spraying cooling essence
to wipe away blood-stains with balming grace.

Walk in the Promenade

6 P.M.
Silently descends the crimson sun
with quickening pace in the grey gulf drowns,
young and old
walk brisk and slow
jog and run
on the promenade
hailed by the lush green nurtured nature
some sit and chat, reeling on cemented backs
some do yoga, a few sit in asanas and meditate.
The too old, securely held in tight grip, step unsteadily
while the watchman keep watch.

Walkers all they are —
breathe freely in the sea-air
child with feet bare
stands and stares
at the baby run with care
in the parambulator!

Woman balances iron-tumbler
loaded with spade, bundle, tiffin carrier....
chews walnut, walks with fellow workers
unmindful of the infant in arm
trying to drink from her bare breast
she walks....
on the road
of the promenade
nicely paved with her share
of tumblerful of cementing mixture
barefooted!

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Sitanshu Yashashchandra

The Siege

Riding over the usual wind, dense clouds of fog slip in suddenly one day
and obscure the lovely surrounding.
Then the wind suspends its journey
and the fog lingers on.

Like that,

or
how certain things surface all of a sudden:
the decoration on the door, a crevice on the arch of the cow-pen,
that nail jutting out of the cot
or a wart on the arm—
the things that have always been there, however disregarded,
and at a stray moment of boredom they catch your attention,

like that,

the troop, all braced up, has appeared just opposite the fort, right?

Not completely unfamiliar of course,
yet, strange to us in a way.
The giant gates are bolted.
At night,
hundreds of flashing torches crowd around the gates
every night
night after night
many many torches...

Hands are sore after bearing the torch throughout the night...

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At sunrise,
stroking the left arm with the right hand,
fingers all of a sudden touch the wart.....yes the wart...

The siege.

Since the siege has been laid,
rules and regulations are flouted every now and then.
Nowadays,
they even
throw all kinds of dirt in the river.
But
who can make the waters dirty,
the defiant waters of this small river
and who can keep it clean either?

The river flows
through the bare land
through the fort
the narrow river...

After the sun sets, you realize
the moon is off on its way since long,
and by the time it is dark,
it has already crossed over a long passage in the sky.
I am sitting on the rampart at the western gate, beside the barrel of a gun.
On the barren land in the south
a dozen pyres burn. As usual.
From a shady corner below
I am sure you can see a fine dance of leaping flames,
from above just a few dots flicker.

No longer do we wonder now;
Nothing to wonder at, to be precise.
The troop was unfamiliar in the beginning.
Before laying the siege,
a few of them had visited us, disguised as merchants,
and we all were left amazed: How they speak, listen!
Look at the colour of their eyes! The fancy merchandise they have!
Just feel the texture of their clothes, and the stamp of their gold coins!

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Then we lost the first three battles, the siege was laid,
and gradually the unfamiliarity vanished.
We are well-acquainted with all and everything now.

I don't mean only the troop, you see.

Initially we did find it a little strange.

But later
we were left amazed to know how
we had been living as strangers for so long!
All mused over this wonderful discovery deep within.

The untiring siege combated relentlessly to vanquish the fort!
With pluck and cowardice and treachery...

The steadfast fort retaliated relentlessly to endure the siege!
With treachery and cowardice and courage...

Two brothers may part their ways,
but these two just can't survive without the other:
the siege and the fort.
They attacked, retaliated, counter-attacked and
resisted, survived and struggled, on and on.

On that barren stretch of land in the south,
a dozen flames glow.
We had a proper place for cremation, there at the lake,
across the shrine of Mahadev.
All the essentials were available,
chandan and other paraphernalia.
Every ritual was observed at cremation.
But that place is out there now, far from the fort.

There the pyres are burning and
here the torches...
The light is not enough and
the darkness too isn't enough, so to say,
and standing here beside the barrel
the night seems endless.

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Let's rush for *Kesariya,*[1] it is better I feel.

There are moats between the troop and the village.

How the lilies blossom in the moats!
The water is still. The siege has begun since months now.
In the village, hundreds of women are pregnant.
In this scattered village spread out in sporadic occurrences,
each street and corner is connected,
united and harmonized by just two ideas:
the siege and the foetus.

The water of the moats has a distinct smell of its own.

Stroking the hard erect barrel of the gun,
I get lost in thoughts.
Now the faces of the platoon are quite familiar.
When the gates will be thrown open
(or they might break open the gates...)
and when we will be face to face for a dual,
I will easily identify no less than fifty of them.
I have seen the face of the siege,
scarlet red, glowing in the setting sun,
exposed and bare in the dazzling afternoon sun,
dishevelled in the flickering torches,
and gorgeous in the waning night of the new-moon.

I have seen it, the fantastic spectacle,
now and again, vivid and unforgettable.
Just in a glance I'll identify fifty of them, I tell you...

...In these tormenting days, many men
look at the rather enlarged circumference
of their women's midriff
and start brooding. Then,
a slanted smile beams on their lips.

---

1. Kesariya: Rushing to the enemy camp for the last desperate battle, when defeat is a certainty otherwise. An act of ultimate bravery for a true Rajput, who would not return defeated to his subjects and especially to women, embracing death instead of suffering humiliation.

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Due to the suffocating embrace of the siege,
or as a matter of course,
there is a growing contempt for one another within the fort.

Suddenly a torch is thrown on the haystacks
and fire breaks out, the wandering flames
lick the wooden doors and in no time
the walls are blistered to the top,
tongues of howling fire romp like a little monkey on the roof.

Who is brave and who is a coward?

This is a human throng.

They abound this world in a rich variety
the dying and the newborn,
the fecund and the barren,
the saintly and the sinner,
the smart and the obtuse,
the pleasant and the mean
those strangers out of the fort,
and those in the womb as yet strangers; all belong to this myriad mass of the world.

Each is putting on a show in front of the other.

This is how I get carried away in a delirious prattle,
and, my friend, even when you're not around, I keep on talking to you.

Kesariya, I feel, is a better option.
But my dear, if in case I rush out there, all alone,
can one call it *Kesariya*?
My dear friend, why do you think so much?
Why do you take things to heart?

The granary will easily provide you for quite some time yet.
The river might not be clean, but it isn't dirty either.
And if you are not exactly happy, nor are you in a miserable condition.
You might not be in a charming society,
nevertheless,
you are not lonely, remember that.

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The abundant lilies blooming in the moats
suffuse the dark night with life for a few hours
and then wilt silently in the musty waters...
...is that what disturbs you so much?

Don't you often dream of
jumping out through the wicket at night?
And then tilting the drawbridge,
riding on a galloping horse,
stooping and stretching your body, plucking a lily from the water,
pinning it in the turban,
don't you dream of rushing to the dark familiar camp for the first and
the last time
to pluck off a few familiar heads?

Why is it necessary for you
to learn the difference between the smell of lilies
and that of the water, dear?

And, after all, the waters are not
so still as is that row of hills.
A flight of green silken parrots often splash into it,
a flock of herons also glide on the water at times
and you too toss a pebble or two into it
once in while, don't you?

Oh, look now, again I've started talking to myself,
just as I keep on chatting with you, buddy,
even when you are not with me.

I keep on talking with myself deliriously...
But now, I have a doubt:
Do I really exist?

The siege is already there.
A belligerent brigade of countless soldiers circumscribes the fort.
Solid surveillance. All are ready with an advanced guard.
A fixed gaze of eyes on eyes.
And, by talking with myself,
I've added one more among all those already present;
now who will keep an eye over him?

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Does such intense loneliness pervade here?
Or a subtler reason provokes you...
–that you have now added one more?

The hills are still.
Over the distant, hazy hilltops,
the blue sky is still.
Luminous constellations sail in the sky.
But their journey is not at all related
with my patrol on the rampart.
Either I walk from left to right or from right to left,
the steady motion of the constellations continues.
The celestial waters of Akashganga[2],
flow ceaselessly.
And my thirst, here.
They are not related at all...?

I am related to the siege. Of that I am sure.

My hunger, my thirst,
each gesture of my body,
and the settled fatigue growing on my limbs from morning to morning
– everything is related to the siege.

Sometimes at night
when a surge of drowsiness overpowers me,
I struggle to keep my eyes open, and
at such a moment I feel so alienated from myself
that an illusion takes me over
and I suspect myself to be a part of the siege out there.

I am really deluded to believe I have nothing to do with myself.
Or it could be that
the galaxy of millions of stars has set out to lay
an awesome and invincible siege gradually embracing me,
and I am a fort—ephemeral but undaunting.
Truth and illusion are now at less than a step's distance
and there isn't space enough to patrol on the rampart.

2. Akashganga: the galaxy or the Milky Way.

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Like a statue of stone, I am on my guard on this fort of stones;
two stars descend and flicker for a few hesitant moments in my eyes.
A scoundrel punished for treason is being pounded by the king's elephant.
His body, bent and crushed. With red colourful organs bursting out.
The florid light of dawn too breaks out through the sky.

I think I will turn into a star after my death.

Stars, millions of stars, glowing, blinking, twinkling,
timeless stars of the endless universe...

The sun rises. And on the other side of the fort, the siege;
and here on this side, on this side...

The fort gets crowded at such a moment.

The pressure is too much. It's a siege within a siege:
the hills,
the platoon within the siege of hills,
the fort within the siege of the platoons,
people within the siege of the fort,
a plane ground within the siege of each man,

and it is crowded there.

Yes it is crowded. But there too there is a fort,
standing tall in the middle of the crowd.
The fort is crowded from within.
Those outside, ask in a frightening voice: will you be able to survive?
Those within listen to the question silently.

But behind the hills—but there, behind the hills?

There are whispers around:
it seems, right below the treasury
there is a vault, its passage leading behind the eastern hills.

Could it be merely a rumour?

Or, they will bring down the fort;
they will keep a camel against the giant nailed gates,

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and then an elephant will strike the camel to break open the gates.
Or, they will shell on continuously,
giving no chance for reparation or recovery...

Or, here, within the fort we will be left with nothing to eat.
Or, they will lift the siege — will they lift this splendid siege?

'Splendid'? What a word sprang from within,
...breaking a siege of solemn vows.

Fear and desire has one and the same face.

Many a time I feel, you know,
that if the siege is casually lifted one night,
this oppressive siege,
then, the next morning,
this invincible fort will burst from within,
how a bubble bursts
if the waters around recede suddenly,
the waters, oppressive yet protective, recede suddenly...

The flowing water murmurs in the dark.

Simple, narrow, quiet river
flows through the fort, through the plane ground,
the quiet, narrow, simple river which is revealed from within the hills
(no, not from behind the hills).

It is a bright day already.
A few holes, some reparations: yes, the fort is there.
A few stretchers, a new platoon: yes the siege is there.

Fatigue of one more night spent aches in the body.
Joy of one more night spent tingles through the body.
The bodyache.
Walking down from the rampart to the river for a dip...

Water.
Hands legs chest thighs back head shoulders arms
the tiny wart on the shoulder...water is closing over...
I am immersed in the river...

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yet I am not thinking about myself as such...
I feel it. I am at peace now. From over the limb the water flows,
neither clean nor dirty
narrow, simple river
flows through me...quietly.

Translated from Gujarati by Avaneesh Bhatt.

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Shelly Jyoti

Lady Kingfisher Brown

I have a tree
in my backyard
clustered with fresh leaves
olive and sap green
gnarled branches—knobby
umbrella-like
red flowers
Hibiscus in botany
Its spring again
Freshness in the air
My soul inside
with wet mud
stimulates...
I push open
the window
Oblivious of the stir
in all its serenity
perched a good-looking
Lady Kingfisher
plump and pregnant
resplendent and magnificent
in plumage so colorful
amazingly brilliant!
A therapeutic
pastime
a blue-feathered bird
beautifully streamlined
poise and grace
taking stock of each flight

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a visitor to my backyard
it takes my breath away

For reasons unknown
I sit by my window
for hours together
watching her perched
the whole day long
a musical delight
just like a song
One fine morning
I wake up to see
a scrawly baby bird
amidst the foliage of the tree
Mama bird assuaging
her ravenous offspring

Raucous appeal for food
slowly and carefully
from bill to bill
feeds the little one
anxiously still
a delight – so true,
to to hold
Of-course it's true,
the subsequent day
the mama bird sprightly and swift
flitting .cheekily
from twig to twig
I saw the baby about
to take its first flight
Mama bird looking
bewildered at the sight

We watched....
its peregrinations
with great trepidation
and the baby bird passed
its first flight to survival
I sat at my window
with bated breath

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saw Mama bird's
pride with marvel!
The next morning
the nest was abandoned
Mama and babe had flown away
The story goes on like this—
each year the mama and the babe
fly away just like this.
The next spring
they will come back again
bringing in excitement
We wait yet again
in unabashed joyous rain.
Can we in no way ascertain—
Is our kingfisher of old
the same bird
which came last to nest?
The tree in my backyard
is vacant again
a nondescript tree
is looking for a tenant
from the avian kingdom all over again.

My Morning Walk

A wake up call
I sleep excitedly
to wake up in the morning
to go for a walk
a therapeutic indulgence
the green canopy
greens of all shades
The riper green
of the leathery oak
the tough green of the banyan tree
the emerald green of the hibiscus
the moss green of
the algae on moist trees
Chromatic therapy
acidifies mind and soul

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Overpowering freshness of air
cool wind touching my cheeks
The fragrance of wild flowers
The air so cold and pure
An abundance of oxygen
fills the lungs
filtering out the toxins
overwhelming indeed!
The twitter of birds
melody of loyal singing sweet
squirrels running around
looking for treasure hidden
under the ground
The azure blue sky—above
the winding path—
beneath the banyan trees
I look forward to....
as a pilgrimage
I take every day
most importantly
to be with my beloved
walking and talking

He says his bit, I say mine
he talks more, I listen...
The only moments I share
with him when we are both to ourselves
I look forward to
my morning walks..
the fresh air ...
Love and oxygen.

My Day

Its nine o clock
I am at home
The kids have gone to school
My husband to office
I am left alone
I

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I have many things to do
I write them on a paper
All things to do
Run to school
Run to shops to buy
paints and fabric loose

I pick up my brush
I start to paint
Thoughts fly random
jot them down in my own way
or note them on a paper tray

Quickly get ready
time to go
to visit my embroiders
to check things in a row

Summers are round the corner
voiles are bought
designs created and sampled
rushed to stores
rush back home
time for kids to reach back home
have lunch
take a nap

Fresh as dew
wake up
energy renewed
space my treadmill
for a few minutes

An evening '*cuppa*'
with kids and some '*guppa*'

Time for dinner
husband to come
The cell rings
my cooking is done

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dinner together'
lots of fun
all narrating their bits
some stories
some myths
Star news channel
the sleep brews
almost getting forty winks
dozing
hiking down the staircase

Good night we say
and cease the day

Magical Brush

Little did I know
when I was a baby
playing around with
colours and brush
that one day
I will paint
the canvas
as large as myself

The smell of linseed oil
brings back the nostalgia
when my mother painted...
I asked her one day
how did she!!
She gave me her brush
and never took it back..
And said 'Go paint'
any surface – smooth or rough
Just like a mother bee! My mama!

Since then I had one brush
A magical brush which I still have!
For years that was kept
in a box my mum gave to me

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I graduated and post-graduated
English was my subject

But
All along in my mind
I was painting words worth red
but my brush lay in its chest

Then I got married
came my angelic babies
teaching and playing together
humbled me
growing with them

One day I taught them
to paint a tree
like my mom did
I gave them the brush
my mom gave to me
They have their brush and I have mine
they paint their walls red
and I paint my canvas white
later they grew up a little

I learnt to be a designer
who can create dresses
Now I create clothes
and design garments

Now a days
I have a pen and ink
a thought swims
a poem brims

I paint one day
write another day
designing a garment all the way
I love juggling
from pen to brush
to designing.

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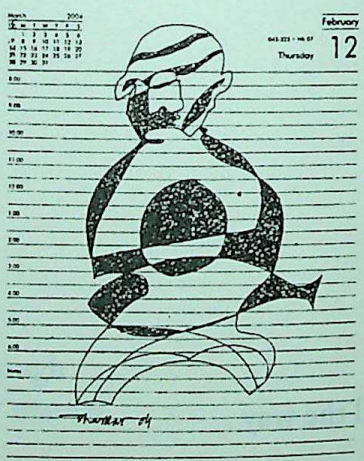
Contemplative

Alone at night
deep in thoughts..

The nip in the breeze
fluttering of leaves
serenity of coolness
loneliness..
Solitude
peace to myself
just to myself..

A strange stasis
Little bewilderment
of times to come

Meditating, deep in thoughts!



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Ved Rahi

We Are!

We are fruits of a tree
that bears no fruit.
A boundless wave
in search of a shore.

We have made
an enigma of ourselves
that defies a solution
we are.

What!
If the script of my life
is put aflame?
The message shall remain
etched
on the ashes
we are.

The centuries have
winged away
in an instant.
A moment
remains frozen in time
we are.

It is our fortitude:
Deprived of our moorings
we have remained
on course
even m our wanderings.

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We know not what
we are!
Lost in ourselves
in the dark recesses of a
jungle web!

Man is exasperated
speaking all the time.
What remains unspoken
are the
inner feelings
we ere.

How would words
express us?
The ecastatic lyric
of a mystic romance
we are.

We have woven
knots around us.
The puzzles
not to be solved ever
we are.
We will be there
till eternity.
The maiden blush
of the first love
we are.

Rudderless,
in our quest for the self.
Yet, people believe
having the insight of a seer
we are.

No deviousness,
no disparities.
Fostering harmony
and evenness
we are.

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Still, in search of ourselves!
How can we aspire
for the
bliss of a union
with you?

Restive and restless
whose confused state of mind
we are?

We may try hard.
How can we consume ourselves
to extinction?
Made of
infinite, eternal matter
we are.

We begged of Time
to spare us the inevitable.
It got the message.
Gone out of wits
we are.

Translated from Dogri by Sat Saraf

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The Bhogi of the Bogamati Shrine

Arupa Patangia Kalita

One could not really call it a road, it was just an uneven and pot-holed narrow opening through the trees created by the movement of men and animals. It was a very bumpy ride on the jeep. The dust carried by the strong winds made the whole place seem hazy. The month of Bohag had begun, still there was no sign of rain. There were clouds in the sky, but the winds did not allow them to descend to the thirsty earth. Even the sunlight was dulled by the intervening clouds. Under the heavy brooding sky, the dry and angry winds were roaring about in the forest, a forest completely devastated and stripped bare by heavy felling, at times raising up a cloud of dust from the heaps of dried leaves, lowering them again at other times. The forest had been cleared on all sides, there were only the bare stumps of the trees as far as the eyes could see, at places heaps of cut branches. One could imagine that this must have been a dense jungle once, full of insects, birds and beasts. This forest has been finished off within a very short time—the stumps of the trees still seemed alive, there was green still to be seen at places on the leaves of the cut branches lying in heaps. In this devastated forest, buried completely with dust, some scantily-clad people were roaming about, lost like motherless chicks. These were the children of the forest. Those dark-skinned young men who were chopping the wood, those people who were trying to cut the few remaining trees, those boys who were carrying the planks of wood from one place to another—on each of their faces one could see the torment and pain of cutting a tree. Those people did not look towards our jeep—they had got used to seeing vehicles like this.

The road was gradually getting more and more winding. On the right mountains, on the left the red river. The soil of the hills was strangely white. But the colour of the river was very dark. Oh, that was not water, those were wooden planks floating in the water. The river was filled with dark

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cut pieces from the trees. It was difficult to transport these heavy logs from this height using vehicles. This hill river would carry the wood to the plains, from where they would be loaded into trucks. On the side of the winding hilly road were some small huts, the insides of which could be clearly seen. They seemed more like bird-nests built out of straw and sticks. There was almost nothing inside—one or two aluminium utensils, a wooden bench, a couple of sacks. The big-bellied, runny-nosed kids with spidery hands and feet had no clothes on them, the adults did not have much more. How far had we come from the city? Thirty-thirty five kilometers? Seemed as if we had arrived in the midst of primitive men from the Stone Age.

Why did the king set up this shrine, called the Bogamati *than*, in the middle of this dense and inhospitable jungle? What was the royal intention in setting up this temple to the goddess Kesaikhati at the top of this hillock? Maybe its out-of-the-way, remote location made it suitable for offering human sacrifices there. Sacrifices were made for the welfare of the royal family, the country and its people. But did the king think only about the welfare of his people? The prince of the Barua clan was sacrificed here only because of political self-interest. Who knows what else had happened in the name of human-sacrifice at the Bogamati *than*?

The turns of the road were getting sharper. The driver stopped the car. That strange river was in front of us. It lay silent, the depth of its shallow waters not enough to submerge a person's feet completely. In its bosom lay multi-coloured little stones and pebbles of various shapes and sizes. Suddenly tides arrive on this dry river, the strong waves carrying away with them whatever they found on their way. A little while later, again the calm, placid, lifeless river. The car went over the dry river. That forest official never came back after being carried away with the tide that arose suddenly while he was trying to cross the river in his car.

There were some trees left on the top of the hill. Still, it would not be long before the axes reached even that far. One could see the tall steeple of the Bogamati *than*. On the left the red river, on the right the hills, on the hillock a forest of teak trees. All along the way so far, we had heard sounds from trucks, saws, axes, the felling of trees; now we could also hear the twittering of birds; the wind was also calming down. In the breeze, one could smell the fragrance of some wild flowers. Suddenly the peace of the jungle was shattered by the loud piercing blare of rap-music floating towards us. The driver stopped the jeep. A red van was standing right in the middle of the road. On the banks of the river, some young men were dancing a wild frenzied dance, to the rhythm of the loud music. They were wearing colourful loose shorts and had long hair tied behind with rubber bands. They looked towards us. Their eyes were drunken, their legs trembled.

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cut pieces from the trees. It was difficult to transport these heavy logs from this height using vehicles. This hill river would carry the wood to the plains, from where they would be loaded into trucks. On the side of the winding hilly road were some small huts, the insides of which could be clearly seen. They seemed more like bird-nests built out of straw and sticks. There was almost nothing inside—one or two aluminium utensils, a wooden bench, a couple of sacks. The big-bellied, runny-nosed kids with spidery hands and feet had no clothes on them, the adults did not have much more. How far had we come from the city? Thirty-thirty five kilometers? Seemed as if we had arrived in the midst of primitive men from the Stone Age.

Why did the king set up this shrine, called the Bogamati *than*, in the middle of this dense and inhospitable jungle? What was the royal intention in setting up this temple to the goddess Kesaikhati at the top of this hillock? Maybe its out-of-the-way, remote location made it suitable for offering human sacrifices there. Sacrifices were made for the welfare of the royal family, the country and its people. But did the king think only about the welfare of his people? The prince of the Barua clan was sacrificed here only because of political self-interest. Who knows what else had happened in the name of human-sacrifice at the Bogamati *than*?

The turns of the road were getting sharper. The driver stopped the car. That strange river was in front of us. It lay silent, the depth of its shallow waters not enough to submerge a person's feet completely. In its bosom lay multi-coloured little stones and pebbles of various shapes and sizes. Suddenly tides arrive on this dry river, the strong waves carrying away with them whatever they found on their way. A little while later, again the calm, placid, lifeless river. The car went over the dry river. That forest official never came back after being carried away with the tide that arose suddenly while he was trying to cross the river in his car.

There were some trees left on the top of the hill. Still, it would not be long before the axes reached even that far. One could see the tall steeple of the Bogamati *than*. On the left the red river, on the right the hills, on the hillock a forest of teak trees. All along the way so far, we had heard sounds from trucks, saws, axes, the felling of trees; now we could also hear the twittering of birds; the wind was also calming down. In the breeze, one could smell the fragrance of some wild flowers. Suddenly the peace of the jungle was shattered by the loud piercing blare of rap-music floating towards us. The driver stopped the jeep. A red van was standing right in the middle of the road. On the banks of the river, some young men were dancing a wild frenzied dance, to the rhythm of the loud music. They were wearing colourful loose shorts and had long hair tied behind with rubber bands. They looked towards us. Their eyes were drunken, their legs trembled.

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They began to argue with our driver. Aditya and Dr. Barua got out of the jeep. Have the boys come here for a picnic? No, they have been there for quite a few days now. There, in their tents, one could see a generator and a gas stove. Behind them was a heap of empty bottles of various kinds. On the left was a pile of garbage: shapeless blue plastic bottles of mineral water, used cans and tins of sauces, pickles, butter and cheese. Clearly visible also many small packets with the sign of contraceptives on them. A cold shiver went down my spine. A couple of them came forward on seeing Aditya and Dr. Barua. What if they did something to Aditya, Dr. Barua ...even me... those packets seemed to lay there baring their teeth, grinning at me. My throat was dry—everywhere around the all-pervading stillness of the jungle. The driver, Aditya and Dr. Barua were coming back. One of the baggy-trousered young men moved the van from the road. Our driver did a quick salute of relief to God when he put his hand on the steering wheel. Dr. Barua was cracking his knuckles, one could see two veins bulging on Aditya's temple. On that lonely road, the sound of shallow English music chased us a long way.

The car stopped—we were at the *than*. The afternoon sunlight fell on the steep hillock, a green hill range, below the fields along the meandering path of the red river. The silvery red river snatched away our heavy burdened thoughts. It was as part of my research work, after many days and weeks of planning and arranging, that we were visiting the shrine at Bogamati. But now I did not feel like taking out my note-book or camera. A sluggishness seemed to engulf me, and make me weak, slowly. I felt like just spreading the end of my sari on the ground and going to sleep under the gigantic mangrove tree with its spread out roots. My world, my job, studies, reading and writing, all my various responsibilities—it was as if all these chains fell off from my feet, one by one. I wanted to sleep, just sleep. I was really beginning to yawn.

Dr Barua and Aditya went to the little house near the temple. A silver-haired old man came out. All of them started walking back towards me. Dr. Barua's lips looked parched. The man who asked for at least three cups of tea even if he visited us for only an hour, had not got to drink a single cup of tea in all this while. He had taken all this trouble only for me. He was from this area, knew the roads and pathways well. He was a reporter for two newspapers—besides, he had visited these places earlier while he was doing his research on dialects.

The old man was having the cup of tea, the two slices of bread, the piece of cake and the sweet with great relish. One could not understand him very clearly—it was difficult to pronounce words distinctly with a toothless mouth. He had been the caretaker of the shrine for the last thirty

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years. His father and grandfather had also been caretakers of the same temple before him. The man was bent over with age, his shaggy eyebrows trembled when he spoke, his indistinct words seemed drowned in some strange sadness. 'Ma, don't ask me about such things. In this temple there were many human sacrifices made in the name of Kesaikhati devi. In the valley of the hill lived the 'Sar' clan. Each year, *bhogis* were brought from the Sar clan....' The history that I had sought out in books and papers in libraries and archives for so long had suddenly come to life in the middle of the ruins of the lonely lifeless shrine.

On the north of the temple were the extensive fields bequeathed to the Sars by the king. Who was that in the field? Was he the young man I had been looking for all this while in the moth-eaten rotten books, in the yellowed paper of texts, in the stone sculptures of the temple ruins. His long hair was blowing in the wind. What an amazingly fit and healthy figure he had. He was neither sick, nor stunted, he was not a bastard, there were no pock-marks on his body, there was no cut or blemish in his body, even his ears had not been pierced. No snake had ever bitten him, nor dogs or foxes; no bird or kite had ever dirtied him. He did not eat what was unpalatable, he had never put left-overs into his mouth. His jingling anklets spoke of his youth and youthful energy. There were no marks of labour on his arms and feet. He was running about among the people working in the fields, his anklets jingling. Just as if a little cute child was wandering around gathering affection and love from people. There he tripped the girl and ran away, there he snatched the bundle of rice-saplings from the man's hand and threw them upwards, there he let loose the two oxen from the harness of the boy's plough...How irresponsible and carefree was his rippling laughter!

But did he really laugh? Or did his long mane of hair, soaked with his tears, get glued to his face? He was tied to the pillar in the south of the temple, below the big peepul tree. A few links of the chain, still smeared with oil and vermilion, lay near the pillar. Was it really just vermilion or was it the blood-stains of that healthy young man? This chain, made for tying elephants, was used to tie him. Why does he try to break the chain? The chain cut into his crazed body; his fine silk dress and golden ornaments are drenched with blood. Does he want to run away? He had gone, one Sar prince from his dynasty had run away into the hills, where he had married a hill maiden. That is how the "Kharkong' clan had grown in the hills. Do the hills beckon to him too? Does he not remember the story of that Sar prince who escaped? Why else was this oil and vermilion stained snake-like chain still lying at the feet of this iron pillar? Did his parents, brothers, sisters—did no one come to look for him? Did no one come running to

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this desolate hill-top, crying his heart out, to see his son-brother-friend tied to the pillar with an elephant-harness-chain? Royal decree! Was it just a royal decree? The tax-exempt golden harvest of the fields, the many royal facilities, the bedchamber of the elder brother of the Sar prince illuminated by the presence of a royal princess — these were people of the Sar clan— they were given whatever they wished. The storm created by the disheveled hair of the golden-anklet wearing Sar prince raised tides in the red river, his cries seared through the hills, slicing through the trees, scratching them deeply.

He became a *'bhogi'*. He would sit on this rock and eat his favourite things. The cold touch of the tortoise-shell-like rock was like the cold touch of his stony heart. His tears had coagulated to make his heart as hard as the rock. He had risen to the top—of society, people, even life. Since he was outside the reach of law and justice, he had become uncontrollable. The fear of imminent death had made him frightening. The breeze from his hair created havoc in all directions. He had dragged that same round-cheeked young girl, who he had tripped and let fall in the fields, even after she had become the mother of two, from her own kitchen and raped her in her own bed. Her husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law looked on. But he was a *bhogi*, a royal *bhogi*. The closer the time of his death came, the more terrible became his dance of destruction. Unlimited food and sexual excitement had made him extremely dangerous.

That is him, with his blood-shot eyes, soft silk clothes on his body, golden anklets presented by the king on his feet. He is running about in the limitless fields given to his family by the king, letting his hair, which had never been touched by razor or scissor, blow in the wind, making his anklets jingle. He carries a bow and arrows on his shoulder, a sharp sword bared in his hand. Whoever saw him bows to pay their respects. Suddenly he jumps up with a scream—with his hands he has imprisoned a pregnant peasant-woman. She is crying like a female deer. What could she do? What would he do? The people in the fields watch holding their breaths, as if turned to stone. He cut open her stomach with his sword—his young hands are drenched with the blood of a human foetus.

Before he was sacrificed, he was made to stand on the fern-covered mound, so that people could see him. Golden ornaments, expensive clothes, adorned with sandalwood, everyone paid their obeisance to him. The husband of that round-cheeked woman who he had dragged out of her kitchen, the family of the woman whose stomach he had slit open— everyone came to see him. The king washed away all the crimes, wrongs, injustices that he had done by giving compensation. He was going to die for the king and for the people. Pointing to a few rough uneven

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stones lying on the fern-bed the old caretaker said—these are the *bhogi's* footsteps.

This was the way, through this dark tunnel, he was taken to banks of the *'kunda'*— an underground spring. The damp tunnel reeked of various odours. A few bats flew past, flapping their wings near our ears. The bent old caretaker had no trouble in crossing the tunnel but our backs were beginning to ache with having to stoop so much. The cold impact of the slippery stone steps on our bare feet sent shivers down our spine. This was the water of the *kunda* — he was stripped bare on its banks. In the unsteady hands of the feeble old caretaker we saw a huge crescent-shaped knife, 'the Chandrahans *Da'*, blackened with rust. The old man was not able to lift it. He knelt down in respect. In the dark temple, the huge curved form of the knife could clearly be seen in the momentary flicker of light ensuing from the flash of the camera.

This was the sacrificial altar. It was as wide as a human neck, and was adorned with flowers, oil and vermilion. That concave block of wood also came to life in the flashlight. From the oil-smeared block ran a little drain towards the *kunda.* Dark and deep, this spring was supposed to meet the red river underground. Its water never dried up. The caretaker chanted some mantras and asked us to take some water from the *kunda* in our palms and raise it to our foreheads. My body trembled as I bent forward to touch the water. What were those smooth-bodied things slithering about in the water? Many long thin snakes! They circled around in the water, went down at times, then came up again. The slimy water leaked out between my fingers. His neck was placed on this very block of wood, the head-caretaker cut his body into two with one blow of the knife. The body fell into the *kunda,* the head fell at the feet of the goddess. What slipped out through my fingers? Was it slimy water or blood? In the light of the little mustard-oil lamp that was burning at the feet of the goddess, I could flickeringly see the body float up in the *kunda.* The dark waters of the spring turned crimson, the snakes crawled all over his headless body, slithering around it, encircling it. As we watched, his headless naked body began to sink in the dense waters of the *kunda.* His head lay at the devi's feet—his long hair soaked in blood, his eyes wide open. A little stream of blood from his neck ran through the drain towards the spring. There will be good, there will be welfare for everyone. The king will become invincible. When the altar had been reddened by his blood, there was a gun-salute. Crackers were burst, conches were sounded. The head-caretaker who had severed the head in one stroke remained ostracized for seven days.

Bending over double we came out of the dark tunnel into the temple.

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Outside there is light, there are people, a little further away is a modern world. That lively young man who disappeared in the waters of the *kunda* is a past, a frightening past. Aditya and Dr. Barua were taking photos of the temple. Someday this temple would collapse, be reduced to ruins, and in the ruins will be buried its gruesome past.

Outside the driver of our car was waiting impatiently. He came running to us when he saw us—on his forehead beaded with sweat. "Sir, please hurry up, there is trouble in the reserve." These days, the word 'trouble' chased people everywhere, every moment of their lives.

"There has been a murder down below"—the driver pointed to the plains. There were extensive fields around the hillock on the peak of which stood the Bogamati *than*, as also the winding red river.

We almost ran down the stone steps. The driver started driving his car silently. On one side was the red river, on the other side hills. After driving a little we were forced to stop. There were the tents from which we had heard garish English music before, on all sides wooden planks or logs hewn out of the felled trees. One dark-skinned thin man wearing just a loin-cloth was lying in the sand on the banks of the red river. Blood from his chest was draining into the water. A large number of scantily-clad men were standing in groups, from the road right up to the camp. All the young men we had seen dancing that frenzied dance on our way up were holding guns in their hands. The loin-cloth wearing men were standing a little away from them. There was no question of our being able to move our car forward, the group of men would not move away from the road, in their eyes one could see the numerous fires of dry-leaves that were burning here and there.

The boys had ordered an ancient 'Simul' cotton tree with extensive stilt roots, that not even four men could encircle completely, to be cut down. It was the royal command—they had the necessary official papers. But the people refused to cut that tree. That tree had been their God for very long; they had cleaned the area around its base regularly, wiped its base and lit a lamp there every day; they had tied threads around it and prayed to it to fulfill their wishes. They would not cut that tree, no matter what. But how could the boys let such a big catch slip out of their hands? The driver was trembling. "Sir, we must go quickly. God knows what might happen at any moment. The people are very agitated, and the boys...." The man spat out his disgust.

One of the boys wearing slippers and a pair of colourful loose shorts came towards us, one of the same sort that were to be found everywhere these days. They were all built in the same mould, as if one was built in imitation of the other. The same sunken eyes, dark lips, a body wasting away

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with drinks and drugs, and the same totally unconcerned brash behaviour. 'All of you please go now and make sure that this news does not get out.' He said these words looking at Dr. Barua. In his voice was a metallic calmness.

One could distinctly hear bullet-shots by the river. Also people screaming and shouting. As if a snake had entered a crow-nest. Various cries and shrieks chased us. The driver stopped the car again.

What happened? May be my voice sounded very frightened. The driver laughed a little. "No, Baideo, the water is rising in the river." The tides would come to the strange river now. The driver belonged to this area. Besides, till the other day, he had driven a mini-truck which had transported wood from here to the city, by day or by night. It was not even a week since he had started working on his own, after buying this old jeep and plying it as a taxi. Dr. Barua had also arranged for us to travel with him for the same reason—the driver knew the ways of the crazy river.

But where, there was no sign of the waters rising anywhere! The same shallow flow of crystal-clear water over the stones. The sun was about to set. The loud cries of a flock of wood-peckers were shattering the peace of the skies. One of the old banyan trees, on which a very large family of wood-peckers lived, lay flat on its face on the sandy riverbank. Probably that tree had been cut only that afternoon. The birds were agitated to find their shelter gone, when they returned in the evening. The birds circled around the fallen tree, shredding the orange-hued sunset sky.

"It is coming, its coming, the water is coming," we screamed out almost in unison. Unbelievable, there were waves in the dry river. Like the raised hood of a snake, the waves rose and rose and filled the river with water. Who was that dancing in the same rhythm as the waves? Who was it going towards the flock of woodpeckers? He was trying to chase away the flock of birds with a clapper. Whose long hair was creating a storm in the air? I had left that young man at the Bogamati *than*. His body had been cut up into two, the head at the devi's feet, his body into the *kunda*. I had touched the snakes. His anklets jingle as he chases away the birds. He rapes that round-cheeked girl after dragging her from her own kitchen; he takes out the foetus from the pregnant woman and plays ball with it in the wind. The king has paid compensation for all his crimes and wrong-doings. All his wishes have been fulfilled. With the royal decree on his head, he has gone completely wild. His family had brought him and offered him as a sacrifice to the devi. Golden harvests grew in their tax-exempt fields, the radiance of a royal princess illuminated their home. Beyond the reach of society, family, rules, regulations, justice, he had run amuck. For he was a

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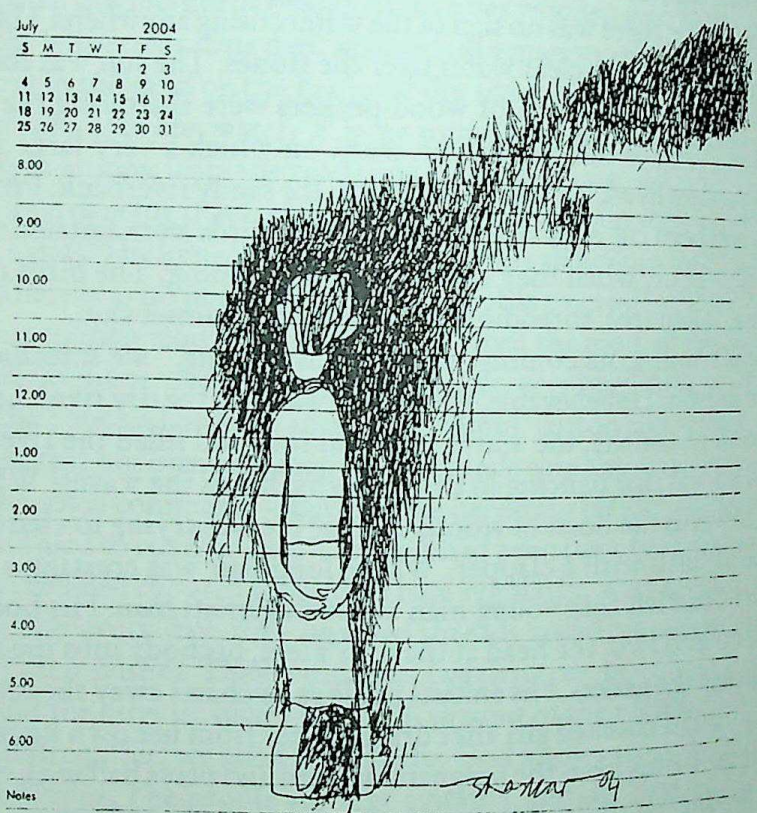
'*bhogi*'— the king would sacrifice him; for the welfare of the kingdom, for the removal of all dangers from the royal throne.... '*Naren Balina Devi Sahasrang paribatsaran. Vidhi datateyena saskroti tripting lakhayng trivintare*'. With one sacrifice the devi was content for a thousand years, with three she was content for a hundred thousand. The consecrated blood would turn into nectar...

Translated from Assamese by Meenaxi Barkotoki



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Heart's Hunger

Aswini Ku. Mishra

Partha was only a child of eight, when his father, his uncle and others of his family had come over from the Maimansing district of the then East Bengal, the present-day Bangladesh, with bruises and injuries all over their limbs; travelling in a train up to Rayagada and then getting transported in a truck and dumped like soggy salt bags in that inaccessible barren moorland called Malkangiri. The truck sped past after discarding many like them, as if they were unwanted garbage. Partha could understand nothing that was happening around him. He only remembered his little friends Naresh and Atanu waving hands to him as they left sitting in the truck. Later he learnt that his friends had been taken to Pakhan Jare and Konda Gaon villages of Madhya Pradesh for rehabilitation. Today, Partha's heart curdles as he recollects the scenes, how his oppressed mother lulled him to sleep on her torn stretch of sari, spread on the gravelled floor under the open roof of the sky. On one such day a senior officer getting down from his jeep had consoled them that everything would be alright very soon and had asked them not to worry. But he also remembers that whenever his father had tried to appeal to the officer regarding some inconvenience, the officer signalled his driver to speed up the jeep, pretending not to have heard anything. If someone met the officer face to face, he only uttered out 'CA', 'CA'. Much later they learnt that 'CA' was the acronym for Chief Administrator. On one occasion, the officer had arrived in their colony with a bunch of cards in his hands. This happened after some new houses had been constructed. He went around telling people that they were identity cards that would identify them as Indian citizens. Partha could smell something fishy. What was the use of being Indian citizens? What was wrong in being Bangladeshis? Partha hated that derisive look, when people looked down upon him as a refuge. Inwardly, he revolted against the psychological superiority of the majority but never could he challenge anyone.

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Partha's village has not been named as 'Paparametala' or 'Gangala' as yet. 'M.V-6' or 'M.V-7' denoted his village and MV meant 'Malkangiri Village'. Several times his father had been summoned by the Dandakaranya Project people for handing him over the acquisition papers of a tin-house, but every time Partha's father came back empty handed. One day some plump officer shouted at his uncle, "This could land you up in the Sunderbans. Think you are nawabs here?" That was it. His mother gave up food from that very night, just kept on turning on side on the bed. His father was always on the lookout for a chance to pacify this official and to have the ill-feelings removed. It was later on that Partha's father found out that this official was only a peon in the Tahasil Office, it was his habit to collect bribes by such a show of authority. Images of that truck, which had dumped them here like salt bags, denying them even the basic means of subsistence, still seethes inside. Men being driven like duck and hopping out of the truck in rhythm, at the call of their names from a tattered list of identities. He remembers it all. The Punjabi driver was as if always in haste. "Quick! What's this fuss?" he had said in scorn when Partha's grandmother cautiously alighted from the truck. Partha's mother, his grandmother, father, his sister, his brother, all were treated as if the were the shoddy, unwanted garbage of this world. Partha always abjured that abominable greed to live, but never could he muster up enough courage to speak out. His father's irritated bearing sent his thoughts hopping away like popcorn into nothingness. He could understand now, the few lines which his father hummed lying on the mat spread in the outer room lighted by the dim lantern. His father's eyes constantly gazed at the open sky, as he murmured in Bangla,

> "Off the sky's bright thighs,
> wispy cottony clouds fly away..."

With this, as if invisible teardrops move streaming down his father's eyes. Perhaps he had been unable to erase from his mind, memories, the twitter of birds, his house there and the open spaces that flanked the village path. That day, the spice paste which mother had prepared from her improvised pestle could not mix up well in the food. One could make out the ingredients by a mere movement of fingers in the curry. This annoyed Partha's father and grandmother. His mother obviously had to endure a downpour of scolding. Next day she along with Kusan, the half naked lad of the Koya tribe, brought home a large, flat piece of rock from the nearby hillside. In the process, both bruised themselves and came back with bleeding hands. Just as Partha's mother was about to start weeping for all the inconvenience, Kusan went away hopping still sucking at his bleeding fingers.

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Another day it was raining. Raining copiously. Dark clouds appeared from behind the Malyabanta peak. The large rain drops hitting the tin roof of the house sounded like the beats of a Tabla. Parth's grandmother and mother were busy retrieving the dried clothes from outside. But his father was quiet, only his eyes gazing at the sky. A hum issued from his parted lips, "Oh! Though rain! I shall rest forever on the green bed spread out on this earth by your tear drops. "His father's face looked pathetic. But her present work kept his mother away from remembering her quiet sobs. Letters came from far off places. No one knew why his father kept on turning the envelope on which were written the details of the address: the village, the post office etc. Partha constantly drew closer to read his father's mind but never did he utter a word of enquiry. He could see his father feeling uneasy and breathless.

Partha's father seemed happy every time his grandmother came up with stories of his childhood: stories of kith and kin and acquaintances. Their faces now appear blurred and hazy. Partha's father looked back at his childhood through grandmother's eyes. He looked back at the indelible images of that familiar river bank. He had no news from his pregnant sister in law whom he had left behind. He didn't even know whether she was alive at all; leave alone whether she bore a son or a daughter. His subsistence at the mercy of the Government's relief, being identified through an identity card, his village being known as M.V; all these facts continued to rankle his self esteem. Partha's father wished he could reside in the serene atmosphere of some forest, severing all worldly bonds like a detached Buddha. But his childhood memories continued to claw and gore him from within. He bled all over. His standing in the queue to get the grains given as relief; being confounded with the plateful of rice he got and still having to give the minutest detail about everything to the Government officials; such memories made him all the more desperate. It was as if someone telling Partha in his ears, "You are no men, only refugees." Why did the world mete out such treatment to them? For what fault? Why was man being churned in this religious turmoil? Why at all? These questions propped up again and again in Partha's mind. He could find no end to it. His father looked as if he would burst in to tears any moment, yet he never cried. A violent tremor of emotion had as if rocked his entire being. The bridge of patience in him might come down crumbling any moment. It was like someone constantly cashing him with the words, "Look! These creatures became refugees just before they could become humans." Partha shook with this infliction which his existence had to offer.

One morning, through the window, Partha saw two, may be three people walking in a group towards the nearby jungle, scattering as they

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passed something that looked like rice grains. One was calling another by the name "Pujer". The other had started pushing handful of rice grains mixed with turmeric, in to his mouth. After having cleared off the wild grass and the broken branches from the place, the men were waiting for someone. Partha's interest in the proceedings increased. He kept on looking at them with an eye of awe and surprise. Someone caught hold of a broken tune "K-u-uk, K-u-uk", as if mimicking a wild bird. Within no time, a peacock appeared from the other side of the scrubby jungle. It started dancing and in the process dropped a few of its beautiful feathers before them. Pujer and the other man started picking them up instantly. Another group of such men joined from behind with all their ethnic music. One man had a six feet long stick on the top of which he tied panoply of peacock feathers and sea shells and started dancing to the rhythm of the drums. Partha could wait no more. He jumped out and in a flash he was in their midst. He came to know, it was a tribal welcome to the festive season of spring.

When Partha returned home after a couple of hours, he was as if Lord Krishna's incarnation with the peacock feather tied to his head by one of these tribal men. On his forehead were a *tilak* and a garland of wild *Tulsi* hung around his neck. His mother and his grandmother looked at him in surprise the moment he entered home. What's this? The very Lord Krishna who had crushed under his feet the venomous Kaliya stood before them! Partha's grandmother was as if touched by an overwhelming air of devotion. She was quick with a few broken lines of a song she remembered. "Oh! How beautiful our Lord looks with feathers of a peacock around his head." On hearing this, villagers made a bee-line for Partha's house. And for what reason? Lord Krishna has incarnated in Majumdar Babu's son. Some had *dhoopa* in their hands whereas others came with offerings of fruits, flowers and even money. As if the whole valley was gripped by an enormous wave of excitement. The air rang with the voices of people who had come for boons from the lord. "What's this going on?" Exclaimed Partha's father quite irritated. He then glanced at his son from head to foot. He was soon in an emotional deadlock. Neither was he calm nor was he agitated. Neither could he become angry, nor could he smile. Partha had gripped his consciousness like never before. Perhaps Partha's tender hands would lead him away from this land of misery. Perhaps he could be saved from drowning and will have to struggle no more in this river of life. The thought of salvation through dipping into the holy Gangotri sent a tremor in his entire being. The dense forests in the lap of the Padma and the Meghna seemed to captivate his mind; as also the vast green expanse of mango orchards. And as if suddenly a ripe mango fell into his hands making him

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fragrant with its smell. But the world around him lay gaping with the thorny garlands of reality.

He gave a long look at his son's face as tears started swelling up in his eyes. He remembered a line from Jayadev's *Geeta Govindam*, "Even the moon amidst the flying dark clouds falls short of the beauty of the sandal mark on your dark forehead O Krishna!" Perhaps the Lord himself has come down on earth as his son, extending His flute from Partha's tender hands into his. He has clutched it in his hands. His son is leading him forward, still forward. Through many villages, forests, rivers and mountains they reach the land of their stolen past...that same dusty village path. Gradually the intolerable torment recedes away from him. The father embraced his son, Partha: drenching him entirely with his own tears. Partha was his sole bridge to salvation. He would spend his remaining days with Partha at his side, as his support. A loud and clear sermon of some epic came streaming down unto him from some celestial land, "Don't worry. All sorrows have an end. Does the sky always have dark clouds to offer and nothing else? Look! In your son's hand there is that string which when pulled shall lift the dark shroud of suffering before you. And then, the moon, stars, the clear bright sky and the unbridled wind, all shall be in front of you. He is your son after all. He shall look after you before he looks after anyone else in this world."

Translated from Oriya by Ramanendra Mohapatra

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Stranger, Stranger

Baig Ehsas

The plane flew closer to the ground. A thrill of satisfaction swept through his mind—a few moments more and he would be free of the burden of alienness that he had shouldered for the last four years. Four years back he had buried his identity and had transformed himself into a money-vending machine. Alien faces, alien language, alien surroundings, alien skies! A beautiful city gleaming in the darkness, immense buildings emerging out of the womb of the desert, glistening roads, airconditioned cars—everything was glamorous, yet there was nothing of his own there.

He shared a room with some of his countrymen. They left for work every morning with machine-like precision and returned every night in the same manner. During their moments of leisure, they burned the incense of nostalgia and drew warmth from the memories of home. After a while, even the incense turned into a heap of ash. Gradually, the flickers died down and life turned into a dark and dreary journey burdened with the load of alienness.

The plane landed. As he carried his luggage through the customs, a strange wish grew in his mind: couldn't the customs officer check the load of alienness that he carried and confiscate that as contraband goods from foreign lands!

When he cleared the customs and stepped outside, they were all waiting for him. Unaware of his intense longing for them, his wife Neelo came forward casually, looking extremely beautiful. Who could guess that the thin and shy Neelo he had left behind had become this attractive woman in a bright orange sari and a snug black blouse, with dark glasses on her nose? And that smart girl, poised charmingly between childhood and adolescence, was surely his own Pammi! But how could she be his daughter? His daughter used to hang around his neck. This girl was so tall...she couldn't hang around his neck anymore.

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Hello Daddy!

Hello Beta! He gently stroked her head. He felt slightly inhibited himself.

Munna had grown up too and gazed at him with wide eyes. Montu sat in Feroze's lap and looked curiously around the airport lounge.

Son, this is your daddy. Come on, greet your daddy, Neelo urged. But Munna hid behind her. He is shy, Neelo explained with a smile.

As he stretched his arms to pick up Montu, Feroze loosened his grip. But Montu clung to him and started crying loudly as if a stranger was trying to take him away.

He isn't civilised yet! Neelo scolded.

Pammi, Munna, Montu—none of them hugged him. The burden he bore on his shoulders felt heavy. He thought that he could discard it once he reached home.

The taxi stopped in front of a smart apartment building The name-plate by the gate announced the residence of S.K.Siddiqui. Who was this S.K.Sddiqui and why had Neelo brought him here? He entered the building like a stranger.

Strange walls and doors, strange surroundings—but fashionable decor. Neelo showed him the way to the bathroom. The bathroom was well appointed, but indifferent to the conveniences, he stood under the cold shower and worried about the strange S.K.Siddiqui.

He stepped back into the room. Neelo handed him a soft towel. He asked her impatiently, Who is this S.K.Siddiqui?

Neelo laughed so much that her eyes became moist and her cheeks red, Neelo looked very nice with glistening eyes and reddened cheeks. She told him—that S.K.Siddiqui was none other than he! Shaukat Kaleem Siddiqui had become abbreviated and this was the flat that Neelo had bought with his money.

Soon Neelo's friends came to visit. None of them looked familiar, He felt uncomfortable and walked around with unease, Neelo spoke and smiled. But she wasn't the Neelo he knew. She was a strange woman: showy, decorative, fashionable, formal.

Quiet descended in the flat around eleven in the night. He had waited impatiently to unburden himself. He told Neelo how beautiful she looked; how he had spent the nights away from her by staring at her photos and reading her letters over and over again. He expected that Neelo would share similar sentiments. But she merely smiled. He wanted to lighten his load, he wanted to tickle her so much that she would fall breathlessly into his arms, like she used to...but Neelo began to yawn. All the stories that he had carried in his hands ready to spread before her, he began to tie up in bundles

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again. As he pulled her close to him, a rather cold Neelo came into his arms. He still recalled the way she would merge into him with warmth. He felt certain that the ice that had set through these years would melt within a few moments and he searched for the pleasures he had left behind. He was eager to settle the accounts for four years but realised soon enough that Neelo was not as she had been before. She seemed incomplete somehow, like a tuneless and unfinished melody. He understood that they could not rekindle the passion they had shared earlier. When he tried too hard, it felt like defrosting a piece of flesh kept too long in the deep freeze. The thrilling experience of spontaneous response was lost.

The same trend continued for several days. Soon it became quite obvious to him that Neelo had changed very much. She now knew what kinds of clothes to wear at what time, how fitting her dresses should be, which parts of the body should be enhanced and the way a stitch could make a difference to one's appearance! She had become very formal and stylish indeed. This Neelo was very different from the Neelo he knew. This was another woman, a dressed up doll in a showcase, distanced from vitality, lifeless.

The load of alienness grew heavier. Would it ever be possible for him to throw it off? He looked around for his daughter Pammi and went towards her room. Pammi had not come even once to sit with him and talk. That could be because she had grown up, he thought. But she could still talk to him about her college, couldn't she? They exchanged hellos at the breakfast table as though he were a guest. But even before he could enter her room, Pammi burst out with a suddenness that his heart missed a beat. She wore trousers and a tight jersey that swung in rhythm with every step. He wondered if this could be his Pammi...she appeared a complete stranger to him.

He asked Neelo why Pammi did not carry a scarf.

Where do girls wear scarves these days? Neelo replied with a grimace. He became silent.

Each one of them was engrossed in a separate world and, there was no place anywhere for him. Pammi had become a very self-centred girl. The entire day she spent in college and every evening there was a programme for her to attend.

Pictures, picnics, parties—and her room was full of friends on holidays. Pop music played on cassettes and they danced. What was this world, he wondered.. He wished he could ask this youthful ultramodern girl to return his own little Pammi. He walked slowly towards her room. He heard Pammi speaking over the telephone...No, no, you mustn't come home. We shall meet at the cafetaria...yes, near the college...Oh no, dear, why

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dont you understand that daddy is home these days, the old bore. It's a matter of few days...he'll go back soon.

Was this his beloved daughter who used to wait at the threshold for him to return from work? He had become the old bore now!

He asked Neelo if Pammi had boy friends.

Yes, they are always flitting about, she replied. But my Pammi doesn't encourage any one, she said.

Her Pammi? Yes, indeed. This Pammi belonged to Neelo. His Pammi was lost forever.

He did not know how many dinners he was invited to. But every invitation had the same motive—to persuade him to arrange for a son, a brother or a cousin to travel to that land. They all met him as though he was a means to an end, as if his was a separate identity belonging to an alien land. He was pushed deeper into the mire of alienness!

Perhaps his sense of belonging, his lost identity, would return at his old home and neighbourhood.

He went to meet his old friends in the dirty lanes of the old city. He was welcomed as though he was an emperor in disguise come to survey the condition of his people. His alienness became an adjunct impossible to dislodge.

Neelo's circle of friends took him as a proud white-collar bureaucrat and he was expected to enact his role of formal cordiality like a puppet. He longed to throw away the load of dissatisfaction and unease but like a character from some old story, he remained trapped by a magician in a strange spell.

He realised one day that during the four years of his absence, Feroze had been a daily visitor to his home and that Neelo and Feroze were not assistant to each other as they appeared to be. It soon became apparent that the missing link of Neelo's behaviour lay in Feroze's grip. But he did not want to muddy the water by throwing a stone into it. After all, he had come home to reclaim his love and though cool, Neelo had not refused him.

Neelo had filled all her dreams with colour. But there was no place in them for him though it was he who had provided those colours. Like an expert artist, Neelo had discarded the colours after she had completed the painting. She had also hidden his children in that colourful world and given them no time to wonder about the provider of the colours. Neelo had finalised the story, without him and had assigned him no role in it. In fact, his presence seemed to have brought unwelcome complications.

A month had passed since his arrival. He had become used to the

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burden he carried. In a desperate attempt to be rid of it, he told Neelo, I must go back next week.

Oh, so soon, remarked Neelo.

He felt delighted with her response and ardently hoped that Neelo would stop him from going back. That would finally make his alienness disappear.

This is the month for bonus, a whole month's pay. I lose twenty thousand if I don't go.

He thought Neela would tell him that she didn't care about twenty thousand; that he had come after so long and she wouldn't allow him to return so soon; that money wasn't everything, after all; that the children had hardly grown close again. He took the load off his shoulders in anticipation and held it in his hands, ready to throw it away. He waited eagerly for Neelo's answer.

Twenty thousand! My god. Neelo exclaimed with her hand on her heart. Then you must immediately return, she said.

His hopes were dashed and the load bent his shoulders.

They came with him to the airport to see him off—Neelo, Pammi, Munna, Montu, Feroze. They didn't look sad to see him go but were as cheerful as when he had arrived.

He walked towards the security area, bearing the heavy load upon his shoulders. His last hope was that the customs officer would help him throw it away. As he waited, the officer looked at him with impatience and said, Go ahead, man. No luggage, no burden to carry, you are travelling very light indeed!

He stared at the officer blankly and walked with heavy steps towards the waiting plane.

Translation from Urdu by Tutun Mukherjee and A.R. Manzar

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Thambala

Bharathi Vasanthan

"What a fellow this Subramania Bharathi is! He has come to Pondicherry, perhaps to defile the sanctity of the place. He performed sacred thread ceremony and declared Kanakalingam a brahmin. Kanakalingam is a harijan after all. Look how this Bharathi has sullied our caste!"

The topic became the talk of a certain area years ago. The subject was the same but each one used different words to express his or her wrath.

The area that got heated up was the eastern end of Eswaran Koil Street in Pondicherry. Healthy coconut trees stood at a distance. Sandwiched between them were the Portia trees that branched out like shrubs. Rain trees, as if they had lost their sap all through the day and the night, stood on either side of the street. Elegant houses, both big and small, adorned the street and created an ambience too big for words. Amidst those houses stood majestically a double storey wallowing in its own calm. A stone's throw from that house was the seashore. Blue sea. The early sun spread its rays. Oh, how gracious it was to see the glowing red sun as if it were a ruby against flame; and the speedy waves hugging the wealthy seashore all the time singing slokas from the *Vedas*. From there arose the salty air. It was this dampness that made the handrails on the balcony rusty. A series of niches that resembled upturned half moons adorned the top of the rails. Through the broken dusty glass panes of the window sparrows entered and chirped happily. That house, quite old, seemed to vibrate with life. Vilakkennai Chetty's house stood facing it. Bharathi moved up and down the terrace of his house like an unleashed panther. His eyes were glued to the house opposite but he was lost in his own thoughts.

Bharathi looked very slim. But his gait was that of a warrior's. His daringly bold eyes were curiosity filled. His moustaches looked manly and his broad brow shone like fireballs. At the centre of his brow sat a kumkum

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dot, blood red in colour. That was Bharathi, a flame of passion. He never in the least looked disturbed about the talk of that area.

In fact, when he honoured Kanakalingam with a sacred thread he told him, "From today you are a brahmin. Do not on any account hesitate to tell all those who want to know your caste that you are a brahmin. In case any one ventures to make a dig at you by saying, 'Oh! Can one become a brahmin by calling himself thus?' you simply answer, 'Oh! I don't know. You ask my guru Bharathi. He will clear your doubt'." But till this day no one in Pondicherry ever dared to question on what he had done. Bharathi laughed to himself at the cowardice of men who never came forward to argue with him.

"Idiots are always like that. Is it not our duty to treat these farmers whose blessed limbs fetch us food from the earth? They form one-sixth of the population of our Bharath land. We should by all means respect them." Bharathi said to himself in a stentorian voice. By that time darkness began to shroud the town. At that hour too Bharathi felt the urge to go and meet Kanakalingam.

He stood up. Muttering the word Parashakthi he lifted his hands above his head and brought his palms together in a form of worship. He was silent awhile.

The very appearance of the French ruled Pondicherry told tales about the forthcoming election. Owing to difference of opinion among the political parties the common people were ill treated in the suburbs of Pondicherry too. It was the mayor's election and every political party was doing its best. The mischiefs of the goondas hired by political parties were beyond control and hooliganism became the order of the day. The public were leading a death in life existence for everywhere it was reported that there were brutal murders and bloodshed. And all these happened in broad daylight. By nightfall people were waylaid and attacked by torch-bearing robbers. To crown all these they barged into houses and raped women. Bharathi was really stunned at the inhuman behaviour of such men in Pondicherry.

All along Bharathi was under the impression that Pondicherry was an abode of peace, quite suitable for the spiritual way of life and a refuge for all those interested in a simple way of life. But the election fever he had witnessed disturbed him a lot. He felt very bad.

With such a thought lingering in his mind, he got ready to venture into the dark to reach Kanakalingam's house. He knew that it was risky to go out at that hour. And so he took all precautionary steps to pass unidentified. He put on a long coat...donned a red cap with a black tassel...with a walking stick in hand he marched on the promenade of the beach and headed towards Uppalam.

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With his chest puffed up Bharathi marched like a soldier. Two ruffians stopped him at an unexpected moment. Yet he did not lose his balance and looked intently at them.

"Are they British policemen spying on him?" As this thought flashed across his mind, the sturdier of the two asked, "Hei! Who the hell are you? Where are you going at this hour?"

Pat came the answer. "That is exactly what I want to ask you. Who are you? And what do you want from me?" His words pattered on them without a break and that infuriated one of them.

"You sound so indifferent! You know who we are?"

"What does it matter to me?"

"O what we have guessed is right then!"

Bharathi laughed incessantly. "What?...What did you guess?"

"We don't have to tell you all that. But we are sure that you are a spy in disguise. You must be the henchman of the opposition party. You will soon know what we are up to..." He then let out a call in an indecipherable tone and the other whistled so noisily that it made the eardrums of others vibrate. The next moment, a few hooligans came tearing the darkness.

The unexpected happened at that moment. As if someone had informed beforehand, a man whose physique very much resembled Madurai Veeran or Kathavarayan, the legendary village guards, came and stood between Bharathi and the hooligans.

The sudden appearance of the undaunted, gigantic figure stunned Bharathi awhile. He felt as if he were in a dream world. He was not quite sure of what the giant of a man was planning to do for his part. Hence he looked curiously at him.

He was so daringly bold that such a hellish darkness too failed to send a tremor down his spine. As if to proclaim to the world that he has an unparalleled strength he was twirling up his moustaches all the time. His eyes were glowing blood red as an upshot of anger and resembled that of the Aiyanar statue. His sash turned headgear showed him more like a genuine soldier and it was no wonder that the others looked subdued at his very presence.

"You fellows can't distinguish between a gentleman and a rogue, eh? And this is how you conduct yourself in politics! Shame on you." He spat out angry words at them. "What did you take him for? Why are you misbehaving with him?"

The others stood dumbfounded at his words.

"In spite of all the atrocities that we commit, Pitcheri still commands respect. It is all because of people like him. You seem to spoil everything. Go...Go back to your work."

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Bharathi couldn't believe his ears. He wondered at the man commanding the hooligans.

The giant of a man then turned to Bharathi and said in a submissive tone: "Sir! All such unruly incidents become the order of the day, the moment elections are announced. These are the ways of the political parties. And we too play party to it. These fellows misbehaved with you for they couldn't identify you. You please forget all that happened here. You please go ahead."

Without waiting for Bharathi's response he saluted Bharathi in the traditional way, gathered all his men and in a jiffy disappeared into the dark.

To Bharathi he remained a poser for a very long time.

"It is all the grace of Parasakthi. It was she who sent this man to save me from the hooligans..." he muttered to himself quite moved. Then bobbing his head he began walking towards Kanakalingam's house.

Bharathi heard someone knocking on the door of his house at Easwaran Dharmaraja Koil Street. "Who is that?" he called out, as he neared the door. He opened it.

It was Kanakalingam.

He was neither slim nor fat...say of medium build. He had a clean shaven face and his eyes showed humility. His very presence made Bharathi jump for joy.

"Aha!...Kanakalingam!...I am waiting for you. Come in...come in." Overjoyed Bharathi took him inside the house. He went with Bharathi as if mesmerized and ran his eyes all over the room.

Wherever he could turn his eyes, he saw newspapers and newspapers. *India* journal, then *Hindu* and *Swadeshamitran* that have reached him by post on that day.. .all were lying helter skelter. At the corner of the room was an old and tattered black shirt and on the bench rested a veena made of wood.

"What are you looking at, Kanakalingam? I was writing essays for newspapers and letters to friends. By the grace of Parasakthi I have completed the work."

Kanakalingam hesitated a lot to speak to Bharathi. Before he could muster courage to open his mouth, Bharathi himself spoke: "I went to your house yesterday. But where were you?"

"But Sir! I came here in search of you.. .And you went in search of me."

"Oh, I see! So it happened like that, eh?"

"Shall I tell you something, Sir?"

"Go ahead."

"It seems some fellows have misbehaved with you?"

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"Yes! But how did you come to know of that?'

Kanakalingam fell silent awhile, and then said: "Some people were telling me about it. Must be the work of Thambala."

The very word Thambala made Bharathi jump for joy. "What? Thambala? Quite an interesting name! I too have heard of that name quite often. But I am yet to see him."

"I do not know his real name. But everyone calls him Thambala."

"Oh, is it so?"

"Yes Sir! Quite a tough fellow...pugnacious to the core. Not only for this election... He is to be blamed for all the troubles that brew here... At the mention of his name the crying child too will keep its lips tight."

Bharathi felt extremely happy at the way Kanakalingam expressed himself. "Quite interesting, Kanakalingam. Continue."

"Sir! To tell you more about him, he conducts gamble shows in the city theatre. He runs arrack shops, sells opium and so he is well off. No wonder he is surrounded by his men all the time."

Kanakalingam went on to talk about Thambala's unruly behaviour. But somehow he did not have the guts to come out with a truth about him.

Bharathi understood that he was hesitating to tell something. He looked at him so intently that Kanakalingam opened his mouth for fear of incurring Bharathi's wrath. "Sir! Thambala belongs to the scavenger community."

The moment Kanakalingam said those words, Bharathi broke into a guffaw. He continued to laugh and his laughter spread all over the room as if magnified.

"What? You hesitated so much to say this, eh? You know very well that I don't care a hay for this caste system. Further, if Thambala is a scavenger so let him be. He need not be ashamed of it. Instead we have to be ashamed of making him do that work. But you see we have the fear of keeping our head in tact. It is in our bones. Look at Thambala's blessings. He is endowed with courage. I always wanted to ask him why he should not put his manliness to proper use. Where is he put up?"

Kanakalingam had the shock of his life. He feared that it would be dangerous for Bharathi to meet Thambala. Hence he kept quiet.

"I am yet to get an answer from you. Why are you so silent, Kanakalingam?"

"Hm...ha...Sir! Hm... ha... very near to boulevard there is Chunambu Kalavaicherry."

"Yes, I know."

"Thambala's house is there."

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"Very good, Kanakalingam! I should meet him immediately...You will go with me."

Bharathi's words fell into his ears like a command. He knew very well that it was useless to argue with Bharathi about delaying or stopping him from going. He knew very well that Bharathi would flare up. Hence he got ready to go with him without a word.

From a distance Chunambu Kalavaicherry looked very calm and serene. Green fields stood surrounding the cherry and little brooks prided in displaying blue lotus. Shrubs and shrubs holding up their berries were seen on either banks and made a feast for the eyes. Close by was a bulrush infested pond used for washing buffaloes. Urchins stood on the buffaloes swimming in the pond with only their heads up above the water and then jumped into the pond with a thud. They pulled out the bulrush and sedges that have outgrown the level of water, beat one another and played to their hearts' content. Adjacent to the Cherry was a well-known pond called Chettikulam. Crystal clear water stood up to its brim. During the monsoon times, the overflowing water from Lake Oosuteri and the seven brooks get stored in the tank that perennially supplied to the public. Hence it enjoyed public sympathy. On one side of the pond the grass cutters were washing their goods and on the other side were a few people with their sieves sieving the mud to get powdered gold brought from Kasukadai area of Pondicherry where they make jewels. It was popularly believed that a dip in Chettikulam would drive away fever, however serious it might be. And one could see women bathing their children there with all love and affection.

Chewing steadily betel leaves and nuts, and holding one end of his dhoti in one hand, Bharathi walked fast while Kanakalingam trailed behind. They were about to enter the road leading to Edayanchavadi. To the west of the place, nearer to the paddy fields was Kottaimedu, a place that once sheltered the French army but now remained deserted. Around the walls of the fort, yercum plants grew in abundance. A road of red earth that led into the village had on its either side Portia trees in a row. Under those trees that smiled through their light red flowers, a few men were deeply involved in a game called 'lottho'. Close by were several garbage dumps that have grown into mounds. Dogs rolled on such mounds and played by chasing each other. Pigs, both small and big, with their piglets were running hither and thither on the mounds. Little children, tiny and impoverished, their skins darkened by the scorching sun were moving up and down. And the hamlet was full of huts, all made of coconut fronds. Some were also made of Palmyra fronds and sugarcane leaves. In front of every hut, as if it were a rule, stood either a pomegranate or myrobolan or guava tree.

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As Bharathi turned to his left and entered the scavengers' street, Kanakalingam said: "Sir! Look at that huge coconut grove".

Bharathi ran his eyes in the direction that Kanakalingam pointed. The grove really looked large. All the trees in the grove swayed in the wind uniformly as if all the fronds were tied together.

"Sir! That's Thambala's grove".

Bharathi's eyes widened in amazement at Kanakalingam's words.

"Great! Thambala owns such a big grove, eh? Really great!"

"He owns several acres of land too...very wealthy fellow".

"Hm!... Is that so?"

Continuing with that conversation, both of them moved forward. On their way in the Tulukka Tope (Muslim grove) they saw the oil-press without its bullocks. But gingili oil extracted a few hours before was wafting its smell all over. Both men walked only a short distance. Then pointing at a nearby house Kanakalingam motioned Bharathi to see it, thereby indicating that that was Thambala's house.

Bharathi exhibited joy at the very sight of Thambala's house. Amidst huts that storey building looked special and grand. Built of brick and chunamb, the house was white washed and looked quite attractive. Its entrance was facing north and had a big thinnai in the front. Huge wooden pillars, copper rimmed, stood on the thinnai supporting the roof. All the window frames made of Burmese teak spoke for the affluence of Thambala. The doors of the entrance remained closed and spoke fittingly for the craftsmanship of its maker. At the centre of the threshold the engraving of the Holy Family proclaimed that the incumbents of that house were Christians. On one side was St. Joseph and on the other Mother Mary... and sandwiched between them stood Infant Jesus stretching out his hand. A cross and from above its head the Holy Ghost descending in the form of a dove with its stretched out wings were all admirably carved. On either side of the carving stood crosses made of tender palm leaves.

Bharathi was overjoyed at the sight of that house. He turned to Kanakalingam and said: "Have you noticed it? Thambala's house is quite neat and elegant. By the way, is Thambala a Christian?"

"Yes, Sir!" Kanakalingam replied, "That fellow goes to attend mass at the Samba church in the big street of Madras Gate".

Kanakalingam bit his tongue for his intrepid behaviour for he felt that he had used an indecent word 'fellow' and that too in front of Thambala's house.

"Go and knock on the door, Kanakalingam. Let me sit here on the *thinnai*," so saying Bharathi sat cross-legged on the *thinnai*. Like a slave, Kanakalingam prepared himself to knock on the door; both of them

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heard the clip clop of a horse's hooves and turned back. Someone came riding.

The horse halted quite close to the entrance of the house. The animal was quite sturdy, looked as if it were made of red earth and its shiny skin spoke for its health. "I am used only for emergency purposes," the horse seemed to say. On its back sat majestically a man. He had converted his sash into a headgear. As he loosened his grip on *the* reins and was about to get down, someone came running towards the animal. The reins changed hands and the horse was tied to a bhir tree.

The man who got down from the horse saw Bharathi seated on his *thinnai* and another man standing near him. He quickly pulled down his headgear and flung the sash on his shoulder. He then bowed before Bharathi in all humility and said, "Welcome, Sir!"

Bharathi looked at him intently up and down. He was bald in the front. A tiny sandal dot adorned his shiny brow. Golden ear studs studded with rubies added to the beauty of his earlobes and the ring on his finger displayed the French flag. He wore quite costly chappals. He was in his dhoti kilted up from the back and he wore a full sleeved shirt. His complexion glowed like fire.

Bharathi was taken by surprise when he wished him in all humility. He sat straight. And when he saw him at close quarters, a bell rang in his head and so he spoke in all jubilation: "Aren't you the one who saved me from the miscreants yesterday?"

"Yes, Sir".

"What is your name?"

"Thambala, sir! Yesterday I was in Uppalam on some errand. And so I happened to see you there".

As he spoke, Bharathi and Kanakalingam looked at each other meaningfully.

"I am surprised...I am really surprised. You are that Thambala, eh? This must be the divine play of Parashakthi". Twirling up his moustaches, Bharathi gratefully looked at Thambala. He was still standing.

"Why don't you sit down, Thambala? Come, sit by my side".

"It is alright, Sir! You have visited me for the first time. Come, let us go inside our house and talk".

"It is quite pleasant here, Thambala! Come and sit by my side. Have no inhibitions".

In spite of Bharathi's repeated insistence he pulled the sash from his shoulder, threw it on the floor and sat on it.

"Do you know me?" asked Bharathi.

"Oh, yes! You are a Swadeshi, sir."

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"Are you a Pardeshi, then?" Bharathi broke into peals of laughter. Thambala and Kanakalingam as if mesmerized by his laughter, joined Bharathi. After a while, Bharathi switched over to a different topic.

"Thambala! Shall I ask you something?"

"Why not, Sir?"

"Do you ride your horse every time you go out?"

"Not always, Sir! By the grace of Jesus, I go in a coach to do my work as well as the government's... occasionally I use my horse, say to go to the paddy fields or when I go out for fresh air. But I am given to understand that the high caste people are jealous of me. They say, 'Look at the temerity of this scavenger fellow'. And they say that in my absence.

Thambala laughed showing all his teeth. Bharathi understood that Thambala did not care much for such backbiters.

"Thambala! However great one might be, if that one speaks ill of others on their backs, then that one is a coward. Don't you know that? You go ahead with your work without flinching. Once I sang: 'There is nothing called caste, O child! And it is sin to talk high or low of one's birth'. Perhaps these evil men thought that my song was meant only for the child and not for them".

"Sir? I can understand people who are crazy about the caste system, speaking like that. Sometimes we are ill-treated by others too. It really pains us. They say, 'No help to shit cleaners' and that too in our very presence. Such words hurt us, Sir!"

"We are helpless, Thambala! You know very well that the evils of caste system are deep rooted in our country. Is it in any way easy to establish liberty, equality and fraternity here? Many are the castes here...and much more are their subdivisions. Above all, to add to the plethora of castes, new castes crop up almost everyday. And they thereby destroy humanity".

"For how long, Sir? For how long should the downtrodden suffer in the name of caste and be silent about their suffering? Among the scavenger community in Pitcheri, I am the only one, by the grace of Jesus, endowed with wealth. All my men will have to clean the shit pots everyday to make a living. We never distinguish between castes and we unashamedly clean their excretions without a grin. If we are treated without any gratitude and sympathy, then I should say justice is dead in this country".

"Your anger is quite reasonable, Thambala! You have put it very effectively. That the low caste people are really the poor is beyond any debate. And they slog hard to make a living. It is this working lot that suffers much. It is everywhere but never at its zenith as it is in our country. The fools in our country will never understand."

"This is why, Sir, we have formed an association of our own and

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go ahead with our work following our own rules. A few days ago, Sir, one of my colleagues was insulted in the White Town. You know how we handled that situation? We carried pots and pots of shit to Dupleix Street and broke them there. The entire Pitcheri began to stink. Not a single fellow could stir out of his house. Finally, the Governor sent word for me, went to the extent of seeking my pardon and thus pacified me. And then we cleaned the street".

"Did you do it, Thambala?" asked Bharathi, as a ray of doubt ran across his mind. To him it resembled a tall tale. His face betrayed his mind.

"Believe me, Sir. I pray to Jesus everyday and I promise by him. What all I have said to you is nothing but the truth. Our Holy Book says that Jesus establishes justice to the neglected and the downtrodden. Whether Jesus does it or not, this Thambala will definitely do it".

His furious and stern words were an outburst of deep scars the society had made in his heart. Bharathi looked at him without batting an eyelid. Thambala cooled down bit by bit and stood silent before Bharathi.

"Thambala! I have heard a lot about you. I was nurturing a desire to see you in your house and speak to you for a while. That long cherished desire now got fulfilled. Fine. Let Parashakthi bless you and your men. We will take our leave."

Bharathi stood up and walked away. Thambala felt bad that he had not played proper host to a guest like Bharathi. He was not sure if he had crossed his limit in his words. As both these doubts began to gnaw at him, he accompanied Bharathi till the start of the road. He then saluted him in all humility before he walked towards his home.

Bharathi and Kanakalingam retraced their steps home. Kanakalingam was in a fix. He was not sure why his master was behaving and speaking in such a manner. Bharathi perhaps read his mind. In an attempt to explain to him he spoke steadily and clearly: "Kanakalingam! Did you notice how nice was Thambala to us? There was no urge in me till yesterday either to see him in person or speak to him, because of his unruly ways with the people, especially during the election. But how stupid of me to be so! I realized it yesterday and confirmed it today. We too should help his community men by speaking to the world against the atrocities done to them. Thambala is like the hard jack fruit. But in fact, he has a heart that is at once soft and sweet as its kernel."

Bharathi who was so far eloquent with a lot of feeling for Thambala, went into silence all of a sudden. His eyes were spitting fire. Kanakalingam cocked up his ears to listen to the words that were yet to be born from Bharathi's mouth. He looked at him intently.

Bharathi, as if he had taken the final decision with undaunted boldness,

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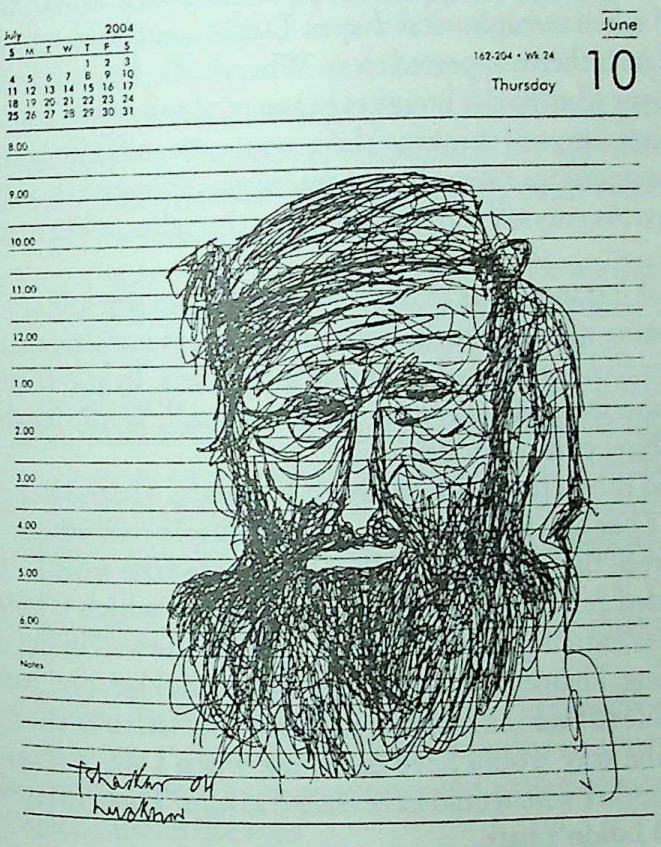
prepared himself to speak in a manly manner. The words that were forming from the depth of his heart began to fall out like live coal.

"It is unfair on our part to neglect and ill-treat a man simply because he is born in a low caste. It is bad for him. And it is bad for us too. We must see to it that we don't get beaten up by anyone, be he a cobbler or scavenger or town crier or drum beater."

Translated by P. Raja ❑



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Deluge

La. Sa. Ramamirtham

It seemed that my curses, chiselled and pointed at the sky gibingly, and unleashed in frenzy, oblivious of myself out of detest with which I hated myself, had taken metaphorical shapes. Dark clouds began to gather in the sky which had hitherto appeared clear. Wherefrom, how and when id they begin to hover like that? Thoughts began to flood when I started talking to myself about myself thinking there was none in front of me. My way, and other happenings around me were forgotten as the thoughts dragged me their way. As I myself was pervading my thoughts, other matters became oblivious.

At that instance I was separating myself from my self, stood it against me, questioning it, and spitting at myself. There is nothing that supersedes the affection that one bestows on one's own self. In the same way there is nothing horrible like hatred for one's own self. While loathing the self there is nothing that is not detested.

I hated the train that took her to her place. I hated her people who came to take her away. I hated the railway employees who rang the bell, waved the green flag and hastened the train. I hated the whistle of the engine which sounded deriding at me. Her peeping tooth which I think is the sole reason for her enticing smile! I hated it when it showed in her smile at the time of parting. I hated the bloody redness that tickled, and passed on into my face unable to bear the separation. I hated my father at the thought that he in the same way would have hated me when I was conceived. Then, I hated my mother who would have smiled at him. Then, there was nothing in the world I didn't hate.

I never thought it would happen like this. I did not think that this was how it would happen to all. Nor did I think that if it had not happened like this, I myself would not have happened. I thought only about myself. The 'my' thought that rattled me from within I hated. All thought-forms melted in the burning mind in a confusing amalgam.

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All on a sudden it started drizzling in ones and twos. It started pouring down in torrents immediately. Each drop of summer rains is an aspect of flood. Waters come unto the ankle, slinging mud under the feet even before I could struggle to find a place to escape drenching. A vine uprooted by gushing water curled around my feet. Water, resembling reddishness at the bottom of angry eyes, flew in whirlpool, dissolving alluvial soil under my feet. The sky roared in agitation. My eyes, searched for a place. On the opposite were banks of the lake. On either side danced ghostly palm trees. Yonder remained fields expansive, and in squares. The casuarina grove over still further appeared like the compound wall to the place. Up above, the grove was the dense gathering of clouds descending down to downpour.

Regaining myself after seeing all these, my eyes fell on the dilapidated stone hall nearby. I reached that structure dragging my feet weighing stone-like under water. I peeled my shirt off, and squeezed it to the last drop. Rain lashed like stings. Coldness pierced my body sending down sensation of insertion of burnt needle.

"Good rains."

When I heard the voice emerging from the hall's stagnated darkness without being able to see the figure, I was startled. My eyes tried to penetrate through darkness. Helping in my effort, the owner of the voice also emerged out. Above his hips he was without clothes.

"This is the right time. After all this dryness, the setting in of coolness like this will aid seeding during autumn, and harvest during winter. It was all husks of grains last year. Now, will it at least come for half the fill?"

His speech reached my ears but my attention pounced on his right hand, and fixed frozen there. His hand was emaciated from the shoulder lock unto his elbow to twice the girth of little finger. The skin also looked like burnt fruit, and made me pucker my face with fear and disgust. Perhaps if scratched a little, nay, accidentally if it hits against something, the bone will peep out?

He understood my gaze. "I have squeezed my shirt and hanged it for drying."

I stammered for words, feeling ashamed. He calmed me down with a smile. "One thing: people of my ilk are superior in a way to folks like you. Wherever we go we invite attention. More than beauty, it is physical infirmity which catches the eye."

I struggled to reply.

"In a way we are hermits. Even if we want to move with people, they are afraid to move with us. Feeling of detest after eyeing damage. However much you build up friendliness afterwards, there arises a wall between. Do you think we are oblivious of the wall? You would argue

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that as you move with us, loathsomeness disappears. O.K. Let us maintain it as true. What is it that shows itself into you beyond this loathsomeness? Pity. Compassion! This leak of the psyche — this pity — which you show unto the beseeching beggar, and the dog that wags its tail hanging its tongue! The sympathy of yours, I don't want."

"What do you want then?"

He knuckled his fingers. "Love".

"First it starts with pity and then turns to love" I said,

"What you refer to is sympathy. What I point out is not that. Love. Love, not even that. Psyches' straight awakening, the chemical that happens out of blend of two qualities. That I want. Why don't you come here? Let us sit and talk. Rain has not abated."

"How much do we yearn for this love, do you know? You can never realize it. We, the physically damaged than you, know it better."

"I don't know why those who have realized this physique as a falsity deride at it. Which is more real then the reality of physical frame? When I brood over as to who I am, I think of my body. You might say that it is after all the mortal physique. Let it perish. Will the "I" dwindle because of perishability? Do you smoke, or not? Shall I smoke? Thank you.

He inhaled smoke twice with gusto. "This hand, this is my congenital defect."

"She, who begot me, was horrified at this, and turned to the wall and when turned back she was found dead.

It is just to ask of god for a thing. I don't ask of him as to why he gave me suffering. But why did he give the concomitant sense of sensitivity? You might think that I make much ado about nothing. But yours is a good hand. Be conscious of that. Hence you cannot be I and I cannot be you. The 'I' in us both is independent of each."

That he immediately slid into addressing me on singular terms didn't seem devoid of respect or culture. It seemed befitting.

"In me, for me, there is just one query. Who deems me as equal? Nobody picked up quarrels or arguments with me during student days. The teacher would stop anyone from picking up quarrels with me. "It is a pity. Why quarrel with him? He deserves sympathy, and sympathy!" The touch of sympathy shrouded me always. All through life this is the pragmatic way the world shows unto me. This is a far greater handicap than my deformed hand. Have I asked for it?

"Nevertheless, how to get what I want? How to turn the psyche! However much one tries to turn the mind away from something, that much it inclines towards that again and again."

"Sometimes it seems good to snatch from life its happy parts, and

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enjoy them. Even though it seems unjust at the beginning, it would end well both to the utilised and the user. But our fear in the beginning for that ruggedness makes us suffer. Even that ruggedness is not that much atrocious. All the ideals of self-respect, self-prestige, self-honour and care for others psyche that help us to cast off that ruggedness end up as weaknesses at the end."

"For example look at my case. By the grace of my ancestors there is no dearth of money for me. I can buy a wife. Despite that, my Hand interfered in the midst of such a daring. In case I had married that way, if not voicing out in front of me hideously, might she not be at least scared in her mind of my infirmity? Let me be very frank. Suppose moved by lame desire I embrace my wife with my good hand, would not her face, stamping on my shoulders, look down my back at the infirmed hand? Could I then remain insensitive even to her slimmest fear stemming from her electrifying disgust? It flustered me even to think of leading a life with that shadow of disgust forming the border between us. Is it not that far more intense atrocities than this do take place? Sometimes self-respect does not yield even to rights that are to justly come to us."

He lit another cigarette. The matchstick "surred"[1] before flaming up, showed up his face and subsided. His eyes looked fierce like that of idols. His tone alone was coming out of darkness. The burning tip of cigarette indicated where he was. It was the eye of darkness.

Outside it rained in torrents. Didn't seem it would stop.

"There was a relative girl. Why her name and place, now? We are not intelligible to ourselves. Amidst this what importance do name and place require? She cannot be called grandly beautiful. But all her limbs were completely alright. But to me there is no greater beauty than that. She was poor. Perhaps I could have married her. But my hand?"

"I was afraid of my hand and hence didn't ask her people. They were afraid of my money and didn't come forward to propose her to me. Perhaps my hand spoke there too? They were afraid of my money, and she had mocked at my hand many a times at play during childhood."

"Whatever it be, would she remain unmarried? I know that boy to some extent. He is good. But he is also poor like them. Only the poor are becoming poorer. He does not have any kith and kin. He took her away to his place of work after marriage. Once in a blue-moon would I receive a few lines from him.

"How to measure, on certain occasions, the creeping darkness upon

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1. Used as an onomatopoeic word to denote the sound the match stick produces on being scratched to flame up.

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the psyche? Even those that the eyes find lack their original lustre amidst the nebulousness of perversion of the mind. Know, how many times the world lacked its splendour in my loneliness?"

"Loneliness felt in forlorn forest and prison is tolerable. But there is time to free oneself from loneliness inflicted on oneself wilfully, or forcefully by others. Or at least there is hope that time would come. But despite being in the midst of people I could not tolerate the loneliness inside me. Is it isolation of the psyche? Is it isolation of the physique?"

"One night I didn't have proper sleep. Past midnight I slipped into slumber. Despite it I didn't feel I had slept. I entered into a dream direct with open eyes."

"It was blue night around me, cooling to my eyes, for I felt closeted by blue glass. Stars hanged like lamps from threads that beguiled my eyes. I was moving, paddling in mid water. Where, I did not know. From either side of blue coloured banks, the leaf stalk of coconut trees touched my shoulders and water. What a surprise? There was no infirmity on my shoulder. When I paddled front and back, bending and straightening, and surging forward I felt my nerves bouncing and balling, down on my shoulders.

"All on a sudden, the boat had struck to stop against the bank. She, my childhood friend, was standing on the bank. I didn't ask her why she was standing there at that time. It didn't strike me to ask her. It seemed she stood there as if we had planned to meet there. I stretched out my hand."

"Holding my hand she jumped, and entered the boat. The boat moved of its own accord. She was wearing a blue sari. Lying on her back she was gazing at me with her unmoving eyes. Water gurgled on both sides of the boat. I clasped her."

"I was not I, then. But my consciousness had not left me. But my language falters when I want to tell you how I was then. It falters. Despite that..."

"I became a blue flame, as if camphor burning still. That is, if the mind identifies itself with a particular thing, whatever it is, then except that thing others become oblivious. In such a situation that particular thing is free from other things. If at all there can be any thought, then, it persists and pertains to that only. In the event of even that thought ceasing, then, where prevails anything that can be that?

All the formless in me not only shaped into a form, but I too became one such form, and synthesized with the other ones. All the deficiencies in me became neutralised since I became that and everything beyond that. I too stood neutralized.

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"All on a sudden the boat dashed as if against a rock under water, and its bottom opened and she drowned there from. My body convulsed. I awoke. White clouds were sailing past in the dark sky outside the windows. The scene that gushed out of my psyche vanished, but not obliterated from the mind. Is it not that each of its part is the story of my parts? Otherwise, would it be possible for me to tell of it this easier?"

"Two months elapsed. It was an evening. When I came back to my room and opened the doors, a letter struck against my feet when I stepped in. The postman must have inserted it through the gap between the doors. I opened and read it. It was from my friend. He had written pages *on* the differences of times, and hardships of existence. Lastly there was a line stating that she had not had her periods for the last two months."

"I sank because of shock. Don't ask why I thought so. Don't ask whether what I thought would happen, or whether what I thought was sin or virtue. Still I don't emphatically know the difference between sin and virtue. The sternest conviction that the foetal emergence in her womb was mine struck my mind like lighting slipped out, sooner than it struck. The longing due to loneliness which was irritating me started subsiding from that minute itself. I am also like all people. No. A step ahead."

"I sent him money. I wrote to him not to worry about returning the money stating that money was for mutual help; and also on general philosophy which I, both believed and disbelieved, and instructed him to take care of her in her course of motherhood."

"Afterwards I started counting the days. A day might be when I would have my child bedded on my chest and play fondling its cheeks. I could feel excited seeing its blossoming mouth while it sees flowers in its dream. Why, I might even go to the place of its parents. What necessity is there that I should continue to stay where I am at present? It will be born a girl. Why was I so definite about it? Sometimes the blabbermouth during high fever is far better than the fort built in the mind when it is in the awakened state. I sent him money every month under some pretext."

"She came to her parents' house for childbed. Her husband could not come with her. He sent her in the company of somebody who came that way. I didn't go to see her. But, once I happened to meet her by coincidence. She was ascending the steps of the tank after her bath, in her drenched sari. I was ascending. She was shining."

"Whether it was a feeling that I saw her after a long time, or that I saw her pregnant, was the cause of her shyness? No, her eyes welled up on seeing me. Mouths closed and opened in both of us but they could not talk. She went away in a jerk, dropping her head down. I continued

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to stand where I stood. My shrunken shoulder twitched. What did it attempt to speak?"

"Afterwards I didn't see her alive. When the childbirth was nearabout, she slipped and fell at the foot of the well at home. It was a fatal injury at a vulnerable spot. She had lost consciousness. There was a lot of confusion. The child died in the womb. They took out the child tearing the womb. They told it was convention in such circumstances. Before they could lift her I touched the child's lifeless body. It was not a child. It was like Gadodhgajan. The child was fattier than the womb could accommodate".

Her husband arrived only after her body was moved. That evening he, and I sat close on the steps of the bank of the tank, and he talked of her, and the life he had led with her amidst that poverty. During that talk, the relationship which I had felt between us was unique. She begot my child. He was its father."

He sighed.

"Now it strikes me. I think that my unlimited hunger of love had guzzled her. What did I prove or tried to prove out of this, I don't understand. Whether I dominated my physique through my psyche or subjugated the psyche's aching through the physique? In fact I don't like these terms victory and defeat. Both are full-stops. Do full-stops constitute life?" However, our talk started somewhere, and has ended somehow. The rains have also stopped. I am going to the railway station. Are, you coming from there? O.K. My salutations."

I don't know what struck me. I wrote her a letter that night.

"Until today I have been thinking of the 'I' of me. Never thought that you too had an 'I'. Never thought of the 'we' belonging to both of us. There is 'I' for the 'us'. Never thought of the possible birth of 'I' from that 'I'. We are that 'I'. That 'I' is us.

Translated from Tamil by R. Venkataraman ❑

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On the Other Bank of Being

Munipalle Raju

Dusk, Twilight of Ogres
A corner near Anjaneya Temple

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

From the day he had left home, strange rhythmic lines in figurative language were being heard. Sages in the *tureeya* fourth state (other three being Wakeful, Sleep and Dream states), it was believed, would be listening to the hum of OM endlessly. But the surprising thing was that he, with no metaphysical awareness, should be hearing that divine sweet hum. Who could tell him that in fact they were the echoes of something innate in him! It never occurred to him that those were drizzles and flows of tunes and songs.

Even then he had been feeling hungry. Without leaning on the wall, sitting cross-legged on the pyol, he began inhalation and exhalation with retention of breath in between for long spells. This technique he had not learnt from any guru. Identifying and merging in the supreme would not be possible without training from a guru. The attainment of the state of *samadhi* was not becoming possible since the long and bushy moustache stood rebuking him.

"What, ascetic! If it should rain, the crumbling mud wall would just collapse on your head. On the outskirts of the village, there is a spacious choultry for the likes of you. Did you find this pyol of ours alone! What an appearance! Kids would get a fright! Get out...out!"

He thought that asking the stranger to get out was the right of the bushy moustaches in the village. Wordlessly he stood up. He did not glance at his dust-covered pyjama, nor did he arrange the saffron coloured vest

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he wore which changed hue every day. He did not touch his beard flowing down to his shoulders. Slinging the bag on his shoulder, he looked up at the sky. The light of the sinking sun appeared to mouth a word of consolation. Perhaps by then the curtains of fever must have disappeared: his feet did not falter. Hadn't he been brushing away these arrow hits of humiliation? Did his movement ahead stop flames of insult? Was there any wonder in his get up making him appear as an emperor of thieves—or a frightful being? He was no enemy to anyone. Why, then, did the bushy moustache call him *bairagi*—for it did not seem unlovable.

All these days he had no name at all. He was an ordinary wayfarer with no address or history of his own behind. Though the thoroughfares were crowded with those negligent streets the place appeared as a desert. On the rods without a call he had been eddying in circles unknown, tired, plucking out thorns in his feet. When he had left home, he had never taken himself to be a mendicant, ascetic, one hardworking with great restraint of senses, a *bikshu,* a follower of truth and a recluse, or a *paramahamsa.* But now he had an identity: a *bairagi,* non-attached—it had been recognition enough. This was a moment when a stone in the slush by the roadside, a stone without a shape—with a secret naada, with a line from the Veda, emerging from long anguish as a sculpture in a temple. A long exhalation came out: not from earthly regions but from the valleys of light in the world above....Oh, Ascetic! Oh Recluse, O Renunciate!....For some reason he turned back to take a look at the bushy moustache with gratitude but the man behind him was quite another. He broke out in a rustic tone: "Didn't Potuluri Veerabrahmam foretell that in this aeon of Kali pseudo *sanyasis* and rascal bachelors would sprout as anthills! Who is a thief, who an ascetic? There's no way to tell! In the place Kottapeta the corpse on the pyre would be burnt! It is a big bother with these *bairagis.* He went on narrating his tribulation to the baldheaded one coming along. But he did not stop.

On the outskirts of the village there was a big tank. On the bank there was a well with a pulley. Behind that a huge banyan tree. Right behind that in the hazy light there appeared a semicircular plaque "Chedella Hanumaandlu Sreshti's foster mother Nagaratnamma's Choultry." He found withered lotuses in thick clusters in the tank. Garlands of clouds till then not visible had been enveloping the dusk sky. Above there were one or two stars. It all appeared as an inward looking world of peace. He felt like entering a land of deep, directed contemplation, yoga.

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II

The mutt of bairagis
Life is an obstinacy.

The huge banyan tree spreading all around the eight directions appeared like a great power guarding the entrance of a strange secret world in darkness. He avoided the roots, which were unable to enter the Mother Earth's innards. With the weight of gratitude, looking downward, listening with wonder the chorus of prayers of birds in the melodious fifth note, beyond usual words, on the very first step of the charity house, as one who lost his memory, he took in the scene before him. None asked him any question. Right behind him two mendicants were entering crying out "Jai, Niranjan!"

In that space with so much breadth and width a hundred could rest without huddling. He searched a nook for himself, lowered the bag on the floor and squatted down. Bonfires of small twigs gathered under the tree were giving light like torches. The glow was making one feel like being in a state of great wisdom, which has no value for time or turbulence. That was supra-worldly condition of placelessness and solitude. He went to the tank, got down into the water. The water was not potable. Suddenly he felt hunger re-emerging with the force of boiling lava in a seething volcano. The wondrous land around had been greeting him from all sides—not asking him to stay way but beckoning him vocally. Till a moment ago he was a *bairagi*. Now a mendicant sadhu from the North had been addressing him as Maharaj."

"Please come along, Maharaj! Would you like to have a *roti*?" The old sadhu from the Himalayas, who uttered these affectionate fatherly words, had gathered twigs and under three stones, lit a fire and was baking *rotis*.

On the verandah a sadhu from Karnataka was playing Shivatatwas on his ektara. The Himlayan sadhu fed the traveller *rotis* with thin *dal* without either salt or mirch. He ate them and had a swig of water from his *kamandalu*. He wondered as to how to thank the old sadhu. Amidst the barrenness of civilized life it may be a practice but in this world family it would be an act of meanness. He could not bring himself to utter that word as he sat amidst those inter-space fellow travellers—not like a man who had lost his way but as an adventurous enthusiast in a state of merging the three times into a unity, which has no anguish, no despair and no deviance of feeling. Only his eyes communicated gratitude. But within himself some other words were audible. In this assemblage of *avadhootas*, yogis, monists,

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kamandalu carriers G-string wearers, half-naked ones with the radiance of the lines of sacred ash on their foreheads and upward caste lines marked on their faces, did he deserve a seat?...Perhaps the winds of history never would touch them. Perhaps no movements or revolutions could block their path. Perhaps these *jnaanis,* enlightened knowing ones would not tread slush pools of agonies and pain.

Making his bag his pillow he lay down with eyes half closed. A wick in a castor oil lamp glowed in silence making the place peaceful, like a resort of all surpassing peace, *santhi.* What was the name of this world, which had driven away the agonies of aeons and the fatigue of life? Is this divine peace that has enveloped him in natural graveness just momentary? No fear; no fame; there was only one thing. In the terminology of silence it was a sound in the language of yoga.

A middle-aged *sant* had been explaining to his disciple in Sanskrit: "the thumb is the Absolute, all including soul. The pointing finger is the individual self of the Being. The combination of the two is the unending, everlasting awareness. The primordial preceptor Dakshinamurty taught this very truth symbolically to the assemblage of sages and seers before Him. When the ultimate goal of life was thus made clear on which quest had these *sadhus* from north and south had been going? Which worldly ties had been holding their souls in bondage? Were these stops only for their wonder or their rest? Was it for this realization all these fasts and austerities like going without water, so many sung and unsung prayers? Was this journey only a long wait or, was this a way of life?

"Who are you?" "Who am I?" His body was swaying. Eyes were shutting close. Having heard these questions, he sat up leaning against the wall. About four feet away was another stranger—not in the group of ascetics. He wore a soiled pair of trousers and a slime covered coat. Stink of alcohol.

"Babu! Could you give me a *beedi?* Don't brush me away. I've been a renowned actor!"

The traveller shifted to another place. The sadhu next to him did not seem to have taken his meal.

Fasting for the body: freedom from care for *manas,* silence for word. Like twin poets two *gosais* were intoning a *tatwa;*

"What if you are a yogi, what if you are a *bairagi,* what if you area king who couldn't see *rajayoga?*"

Then the chorus followed suit:

"What if one has *rudrakshas* or protective beads: for those who could not go up the six lotuses and find Brahma?"

Deep yogic mysteries were opening up in layers after layers.. Sleep

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eluded him. The middle-aged sant went further explaining Kundalini *shakti* in prose.

"The serpent lies coiled in Moolaadhaara. It bathes the 72,000 blood vessels in nectar It touches the brain matter in the skull.

Long forgotten ambrosia like lines and lines familiar for long were being heard in a folk style. He wondered if the entire fund of knowledge all over the nation had travelled to that spot.

"Brother! Listen. Garimireddy of Banaganapalli and Ma Atchamma had dropped the fourteen *Kalajnaanas* of Potuluri Veerabrahmam in the large storage basket of grain. That is where the tamarind tree protects them. At signs of deluge the tree changes colour and turns blood red. That is the sign of the approaching deluge."

A sadhu of Kabir Panth had been singing the *dohas* haltingly.

Niraakaar hamaara baap! Saabakaar hamaara maa!

There was a discussion in progress between him and a *bairagi* of Eknath Shirdi Sai follower. *"Gurukrupaanjana payo bhayee."* Guru is all. Go ahead always searching for his feet. Metaphysical, philosophical seeds had been coming rolling down in the place of confluence of the boulders and the caves of the Himalayas and the middle country and from the innermost caves of his lone heart, making tinkling sounds of little bells. He had a fit of cough. For the last one week it had been pestering him. O Auspicious star filled Night! My salutations with joined palms to you. Do not go away searching for dawn. Have mercy on me. Stay here. Remain here like this!

III

The threshold of the Enchanting magic City
The fortunate time of a blessed great dream

Perhaps no deity had listened to his prayer. The night felt like the lap of the deity of peace that passes understanding elapsed. Day was breaking. His sleep helped him cross the borders of the kingdom of extensive *manas*. Rubbing his eyes, he looked around. There was no sight of the *sadhu* group.

He went to the tank for his ablutions and noticed many sadhus taking a dip and offered salutations to them. When he took a dip it seemed that the fever he had suffered disappeared. 'Hara Hara Mahadev! Shambo Shankar! Gurudatta Maharaj! Jai Niranjan!' With these calls the lotuses in the tank vibrated. Perhaps there were no feelings of desirelessness, consciousness of the unawareness, a state of intentionlessness in this atmosphere. In the sky above from end to end there was an undefinable movement of

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air, some wondrous song like the first notes of the Veda and a great wait. An atmosphere of flurry, excitement seemed to be blowing in the air. The group of *sadhus* headed towards the East without taking a look back at the choultry. Whereto was this run? Whatever was there in that direction?

"Come. Come, Young Maharaj! Invited a half-clad *sadhu*, who had been filling his pipe with hashish. He had been enjoying the leaf with half closed eyes.

The Sadhu from the South making coffee without milk was inviting him with a smile to have a cup: "*Va! Appa! Tambi. Kaafi Saapidu!*" With a few sips the bouts of cough disappeared.

On the edge of the stairs of the choultry, lay a woman half-naked, suckling her little one. He took out a sheet of cloth from his bag and covered the mother and her baby with it. He did not cast a glance at the three rupee coins that slipped out when he was pulling out the sheet, though the Tamil sadhu had been calling attention to his money. Those were the last of his valuable cash. The *ektara sadhu* was looking at the caste marks on his forehead in a piece of broken looking glass. The parrot fortuneteller was teaching new tricks to his bird. With peas ingested he felt a little heavy. Would he be able to join the group in a run? Would the journey go ahead? Habitation under a tree. Eating alms off the palm. With innumerable questions the air seemed to be a pregnant woman. Who are you, the nameless traveller? One taken a fright? A heart-broken lover? A Bhadra, a blessed one? Your dream is your guru. Your grief is your guru. Go, go, reach them.

IV

Space—a laboratory of divine endeavour
Earth—only a playground of the soulless

On the way the group of *sadhus* went on singing the glory of Siva and around them villagers flocked by the hundred. All were looking at the sky perhaps waiting for a sign or message. There was only matter the villagers had been discussing using strong language. They were the same terms in which the day before, in the evening, the arrogant one reviled that all *sadhus* were cheats and thieves. Though the fire had been burning for four days there was no sign of the corpse burning. Though they had been pouring out potfuls of water the pyre was not getting extinguished. Whoever was that yogi? What was his extraordinary power?

Meanwhile the rays of the rising sun a flock of innumerable birds

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came up blocking the rays of the sun. Garuda, leading them, showed the way. A shadow without fringes was enveloping the entire earth. The shadow appeared like a miracle, as at the time of an eclipse. Having taken a round, Garuda turned East. The villagers began clapping. The *sadhus* started singing in a loud voice God's praise stepping forward to the East. A *koss* away smoke had been rising. By that time, people had already crowded around the burning pyre. The traveller stood fixed without any awareness in front of the scene.

The yogi on the pyre appeared like one very tall, hands reaching his knees with a flowing white beard comparable to the whiteness of Mount Kailash. There was an enchanting smile on his face. On the body saffron robe. Though shut very stable eyes. Who was this one with divine bliss on his face? From a mere earthen body how could this bliss filled being take shape?

Villagers were breaking coconuts before the pyre. The sadhu who readout *slokas* in Sanskrit began reciting Varunasooktham propitiating and invoking the rain deity. The other pandits followed suit: "Oh! Varuna! You are the one who makes the world green with crops. You are the one who blesses the rivers with your boon of water. Accept our prayers, O Donor of Life!" This song was not of a century. These voices had been pristine.

The traveller had been listening to them becoming one with the sound. Perhaps a period of twenty-four minutes elapsed. With a slight drizzle, cool winds for awhile and later rain drops like a shower of flowers, the funeral pyre was extinguished.

Right at that moment people consecrated the land and began putting up a memorial. Huge lumps of clay moistened with water went flying. In a few moments with no implements or equipment a memorial emerged. The traveller contributed his mite working with the villagers forgetting his body clamouring for rest. "The bodies of the great yogis would not be consumed by fire. For them spiritual peace comes only in a watery grave or in Mother Nature's lap," Pandits were explaining.

Over the memorial the villagers put up a bamboo trellis and covered it with palmyra leaves. For the visitors and pilgrims they put up temporary sheds for lodging. The entire night was spent in singing *bhajans*, which reverberated all over. A piece of lifeless land till the night before, the place was transformed into a land of bliss where with joy and laughter people celebrated a festival of bliss. The voice of the pristine life with the touch of breeze woke up to produce divine melody of the universal flute. Was it for this that he had taken birth? Was it for this the great journey? Fatigue. Fever. A fit of cough. Phlegm.

While day was breaking, in huge vehicles businessmen from Rajasthan

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arrived on the scene and put up tents. On the land that was slushy wet they spread dry straw. They gave clothes to all the *sadhus* and distributed sweets. On the traveller lying weakly on the ground some one spread a sheet. By then he had already been clothed in a warm saffron robe. Sleep, grieflessness and unworldly bass vocal notes were being heard. There was no knowing where the Time line stopped—a volley of bad words.

From some corner emerged the ragged coat, who had earlier made his appearance from the unknown. "Brother! Trust me! Don't ever be entangled in this world, which is an enchanting gambling den. Look at me," the man was trying to wake him up. He must have been handsome once. With smoking the narcotic his eyes had been shining like lamps. Though a little faltering his voice was grave. His pockets were full of certificates of merit. He went on reading out a sentence or two from some of them. Receipts of pawnbrokers for the medals of gold pledged, sewn up on a length of cloth, was his prized possession. "Brother! Listen to me. I played in Shakespeare plays: To be or not to be is the question—Friends, Romans, Countrymen!" That great singer Chidroopa in the Play *Sarangadhara* wouldn't leave me for a moment...Seeing me in the role of Vipranarayana, the zamindar's sister-in-law put a hundred *tola* ornaments on my neck. Wake up, brother, I the bag under your head there might be a couple of rupees ...A single puff would be enough."

In the severity of fever, delirious talk. The incoherent talk of the intoxicants dried up in his blood vessels. In half an hour the fever subsided. There was no bag under his head. The last of his valuables, his camera, was there. Did his bond with earthly things snap? In the afternoon too someone came to him and gave him things to eat. A little strength came. There was no fever. Around the memorial, people were planting seedlings. When he came out of the tent, some Buddhist *bikshus* gathered around the memorial. Perhaps, because of the bells, he did not hear the debate.

V

"Which king's spy are you?"
"Which fragment of dawn are you?"
"Were the Marwari traders carrying him away in the ambulance?"
"Where? To the hospital."
"Why?"
"For treatment."
"No, no discussion."
"Sh! Sh! Silence, Maharaj!"

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He could hear no more. Was he given an injection? By evening a doctor came. He was examining him.

"Who are you? Aren't you Raghu?"

The doctor removed the glasses and asked *him* again.

"Who? ME? No!"

"Look at me, Raghu....I'm Satchidanand!"

"Sat....Chit.....Be happy. Shine.....Don't grieve." He said deliriously.

"Look, Raghu, our Lavanya is here in this hospital.... Special Ward.... Doctor....We'd send you there."

"Please don't send me anywhere."

"Ward Boy! Special Ward.....Patient....Stretcher! Stretcher!.....Tring! Tring....Lavanya! Our Raghu is found. He's here. We're sending him to your ward....Lavanya!"

One has to go up the lift to reach the Special Ward.

The Ward Boys were saying: "The bearded man is very light."

Doctor Lavanya came and lifted the sheet. Underneath there was no patient, no Raghu.

Translated from Telugu by V.V.B. Rama Rao

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An Orchid in the Cemetery

Paramita Satapathy

"Are you listening to me? You have to say; if you don't you'll regret it. I'm telling you."

Sebati stayed standing, her eyes downcast.

"I'm asking you something! Can't you hear me? Look at me. What do you think I am? Look up! Raise your eyes, I'm speaking to you!" Sumitra shouted, her voice becoming more and more agitated. Her right palm tightened around the baton she was holding; her face turned crimson.

Sebati raised her eyes. Sumitra's eyes, bright with anger, appeared through a haze. Perhaps she didn't consider it necessary to have eye contact. She lowered her eyes

"Nah! This girl doesn't deserve any pity. What she needs...." Sumitra sighed deeply out of sheer helplessness.

"I know. Didi," Malini interjected. "This tight-lipped woman is very stubborn. I've known that since I first set eyes on her. She sits quietly like this all the time. As if she's waiting for some long-lost lover." Malini was the monitor for the women prisoners. She'd earned the right to take a dig at all and sundry.

Sebati's face betrayed no reaction to these insults. She continued to stand in the same way—as if both her feet were buried in the ground and she was just a silent post, which had stretched out resting on that.

"Tell us everything. You've committed a sin. What else could you do? Now bear the consequences of hiding everything. At least Didi will be a bit lenient if you tell the truth." Leaning towards Sebati, Malini spoke in a hushed voice, loud enough for Sumitra to hear.

Sebati didn't move; she didn't even look up.

"Are you going to say something or not? Come on, tell me. who did this?" Sumitra asked in a commanding voice.

Sebati didn't answer. As if she hadn't heard the question or it wasn't

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meant for her. Sumitra trembled with anger and frustration. "What cheek!" she blurted out between clenched teeth. The right hand with the baton went up of its own accord and came down hard on Sebati's left side, at her waist.

"Ah!" Sebati's face creased in pain. Even then, she didn't look up.

Sumitra was stricken with fear. The lady doctor had said Sebati was three months pregnant. She had hit her on the waist—what'd she do if something happened?

"All right! Let the jailor come tomorrow; the matter will be discussed in his presence. This one will face the music, since she wants to do it the hard way." Sumitra said in a lowered voice, before turning on her heels to walk away.

Sebati was kept in solitary confinement. She was going to stay there until the matter was resolved and the facts known.

Her tired body slumped in one corner of the enclosed room. The constant grilling had taken more out of her than the beating or simple fatigue.

The prisoners in the female cell were whispering among themselves. The husband had been incarcerated for the past seven months, and on charges of murder at that. But look at the licentious wife! Going around with a three-month tummy! Inside the jail!

The news had already reached Suresh. Initially, he had not believed it, and there was no possibility of asking Sebati directly. But a little later, he began to suffer terribly. How could Sebati do such a thing! He wanted to run away or bang his head against the wall. As it was, he was serving a life term. What reason did he have to continue to live? Sebati used to say, "We'll fight; I'll hire a good lawyer. You'll be acquitted soon. Just be patient, that's all I ask."

This he could not endure, however. It was difficult for him to associate such things with Sebati, even in his imagination. Suresh sat down with his eyes closed, holding his head in his hands. The kitchen in one corner of the veranda of his one-room house, surrounded by bamboo lath screens, floated up before his closed eyes. The well was at a distance from the veranda. Sebati had planted a pumpkin plant that had spread close to the kitchen. The image of Sebati looking at that green pumpkin plant with contented eyes at odd hours of the day fleeted before his eyes.

Sebati!

Sebati was the only person who had ever mattered to him. He recalled the first time he had seen her. She was returning from school absentmindedly, wearing a blue skirt and white blouse. Her two plaits were hanging down her back. She was pressing her books to her bosom, walking down the road not looking anywhere in particular. Suresh had blown the horn of the

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autorickshaw repeatedly even though there had been no need to do so. Sebati had raised her head with a start, and her eyes had locked on Suresh's. That was perhaps when Sebati was studying in the eighth class. Suresh reminded her of that first meeting after they were married, but Sebati could not remember it. Suresh felt let down. Sebati laughed and said that she remembered many other meetings even if not that particular one.

A faint smile crossed Suresh's face, amazed that he remembered that first meeting so vividly. The past seemed more alive after he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

He had to tend to the Ashoka trees planted around the field; he had to water them. Suresh stood up.

It was not water, but rather a stream of memories that seemed to be flowing. The past floated before his eyes like a movie. He was able to recall his restlessness, insanity and gloom when he received the news that Sebati's marriage had been fixed with someone else—a daily wage driver in a government office, whose job was likely to be made permanent. Suresh had not been able to maintain his sanity after that. He cursed himself. Why had he not been able to tell Sebati during all that time that he loved her? What had held him back? Sebati was going to marry a driver like him; the only difference was that Suresh drove an autorickshaw and the other man was a driver in government service. Suresh owned his autorickshaw—surely, that should count for something!

He heard later that marriage negotiations had been abandoned because of dowry demands from the groom's family. He was ecstatic, and decided to propose to her. But Sebati had amazed him, sending a message through her younger sister asking him to meet her at the school gate. She was waiting for him. She threw him totally off-balance when she asked. "Suresh, can you marry me?" Suresh had never imagined that the matter closest to his heart would come out into the open in such a manner. He felt as if the wealth of the entire world had fallen into his arms at that moment. He had been left momentarily speechless and then blurted out, "I had thought of organizing a few things at home first." He felt like laughing when he thought of that today. As an answer, Sebati had said, "That house will do."

Sebati's father and brother were dead set against the alliance. They were not going to give the girl away to a household that had nothing at all. On top of that, nothing was known about Suresh's parents. It was true that Suresh didn't have any parents; he himself had no idea why he didn't have them. Sebati asked to meet him again and advised him to pay her father some money.

Suresh acted quickly and met Sebati's father the very same evening.

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He paid him ten thousand rupees, to be deposited in Sebati's name. The marriage was solemnized after Diwali that year.

Suresh borrowed the money from Ratanlal, alias Tulu Seth, giving his autorickshaw as collateral. Tulu Seth had studied with him at school. Suresh had stopped school after the seventh class, but he knew that Tulu Seth had studied up to matriculation. With his savings he threw a party for his friends and purchased a few household articles.

After his marriage he no longer would laze about and chat with his friends in the nearest square, or drink country liquor with them as he had done before. He no longer needed such entertainment. Now he was driving someone else's autorickshaw on hire. Once his shift was over he wanted to get back home as quickly as he could.

"I hope she's doing well..."

"What has she had for lunch today?"

"She was running a fever...has she been taking the medicine?"

His friends took digs at him because even in her absence he showed his wife a great deal of deference and addressed her respectfully.

His earnings driving the hired autorickshaw were about a fourth of that with his own vehicle. That was just about enough to make ends meet." Suresh was becoming despondent about getting his autorickshaw back from Tulu Seth, and Tulu Seth regularly visited his house on the pretext of getting the money back from the loan. He would address Sebati affectionately as bhabhi Whenever he came he would always sit on the old. rickety chair on the narrow veranda. Suresh would look apprehensively at the legs of the chair, since it had already been repaired twice.

At regular intervals Tulu Seth collected the interest on the loan. After a while, he began to insist that he would release the vehicle only once the total amount had been repaid, threatening to hire someone else to drive it if he was not paid back soon, Suresh knew he should have had the vehicle released a long time ago, and that there would be problems if it was not used. After a long lay-off it would need repairs. But Suresh could not bring himself to believe Tulu Seth would allow someone else to drive it.

He was feeling extremely irritated. His dreams for a life with Sebati were starting to dim. At times he wanted to buy her a new sari or take her on his autorickshaw for a ride to some distant place. Or perhaps go to a *dhaba* for a delicious meal of rice and chicken curry. They needed a new bed in the house, and the cheap gas oven had to be traded in for a new one. They should at least have a small television. But none of these things could come about.

"We must get the vehicle released," Sebati told him one day.

"I agree, but how?" Suresh's voice was sad.

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"We'll try to save a bit more. We'll cut down on household expenses. Here...take these and sell them. Pay some money to Tulu Seth: ask him to release the autorickshaw. We can repay the money in monthly installments if we can have it back." Sebati wrapped her only pair of earrings in a piece of paper and gave them to Suresh.

"We'll think of having a child only when our circumstances improve," Sebati murmured in a faint voice.

"What did you say?" Suresh marvelled at Sebati's farsightedness.

Tulu Seth gave them three thousand rupees for the earrings, but he would not release the autorickshaw. He said he would let Suresh drive it only when he had paid five thousand rupees more. Repeated pleas by Suresh had absolutely no effect. Tulu Seth told Suresh. "My wife has gone to her father's along with my son. My old father and two younger brothers are at home. We're terribly inconvenienced, as there's no one to cook. Ask Sebati *Bhabhi* to cook for us for four or five days. You're not at home during the day anyway..."

Suresh turned and glared at Tulu Seth before he could finish his sentence.

"All right. Come and take the autorickshaw if you want to," Tulu Seth's voice turned milder. Suresh turned on his heels and walked away without responding. He told Sebati everything, except Tulu Seth's last proposal.

For some reason, Suresh became distracted time and again that day while he drove around. The afternoon weighed on him; he constantly thought of Sebati: the fragrance of her body when she entered the house after her bath, her face shining in the sun as she hung out clothes to dry in the courtyard, her bare midriff and back between her blouse and sari as she did the chores in the kitchen. He turned the autorickshaw around and headed home.

'"What's the use of talking like that? Explain things to Suresh. It's no big deal. Such things are common these days. Does anyone give away money just like that? Do I respect you as a sister-in-law or not? A brother-in-law ought to have some claims on you after all!" Tulu Seth's voice could be heard from behind the half-open door. Suresh stopped short for a moment. There were a pair of slippers outside the door. Amazed, he kept staring at them.

"Let him come; he'll meet you. Now, please leave me alone." Sebati's voice was sober and controlled.

"What is the problem if I stay for a while? I come running to you every time. Do you think I come for the repayment of the loan? What need is there for money when you're here? Think of me at least once." Tulu Seth's voice sounded strange to Suresh.

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"'No. no...I can't do it...leave me alone...go away...leave. I'm telling you...' Sebati's high-pitched voice betrayed her anxiety.

Suresh could not restrain himself any longer. He pushed open the door and went in. Tulu Seth was holding Sebati and pulling her towards him with all his strength. Sebati was struggling, trying to free herself.

"Let go of her...I'm telling you...let go," hissed Suresh through his clenched teeth. His eyes were red with anger; his body shook uncontrollably; his palms had turned into fists.

Tulu Seth turned without releasing his hold on Sebati. Both he and Sebati were surprised to see Suresh.

"No, I won't let go of her. What are you going to do? Rascal, you beg and borrow money, but you won't oblige me when I ask for a favour!" He turned towards Sebati and kept on pulling her towards him. His eyes had also turned violent.

"Will you take your hands off her?" Suresh's face was grim.

"I told you I won't. What will you do? You'll borrow money from others and keep your wife chaste at home, is it?" Tulu Seth said that without looking at Suresh, continuing to wrestle with Sebati.

Suresh turned towards the gas oven to his left. On it there was a covered silver pot. A few potatoes and onions lay on the uneven floor, along with a discoloured long blunt knife with no handle. Sebati used the knife to chop vegetables. Without thinking Suresh grabbed it and, with all his strength, stabbed the space between the back of Tulu Seth's neck and his shirt. The knife did not go in too deep, and came out as Suresh drew back his hand. Blood spurted from Tulu Seth's neck like coloured water from a sprayer. There was blood on Suresh's face and chest. Tulu Seth looked more surprised than hurt at the sudden attack. He let Sebati go and turned around wild-eyed. "Bloody son of a bitch...." That was all he managed to say.

Tulu Seth's shining eyes, bent on retaliation, were not lost on Suresh. Tulu Seth was stockily built and about four inches taller than Suresh. There was no time to think. With his eyes closed he shoved the knife hard into Tulu Seth's abdomen. It went deep inside the left belly and Suresh's hand got stuck there. Tulu Seth had raised his hand to strike Suresh, but now it automatically went to his abdomen and he began to bend over. Seeing this, Suresh pulled out the knife and stabbed him again in the stomach with all his strength. Tulu Seth's hands fell limply to his sides. His head turned to one side at an unnatural angle and his legs wobbled. He crumpled in a heap against the pot of water, turning yet again. He sat on the floor, leaning against the left wall, and slumped to one side. His mouth gaped open, as if he was letting out a shriek. But there was no sound. The stream of blood

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from the deep gashes in his neck and abdomen started clotting on the floor. His blue shirt was drenched in blood. Suresh and Sebati stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

Suresh was kept in the police lock-up for twenty days, and from there he was transferred to the circle jail when the Sessions Judge sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Sebati went to see him regularly when he was in the lock-up and tried to boost his morale. She asked him not to lose hope, reassured him that she was arranging for a lawyer to represent him in the higher court. Suresh remembered that once or twice Sebati had arrived looking very sad. After a lot of questioning, she told him Tulu Seth's father and brothers were making scenes wherever she went. They abused her using filthy language and had destroyed Suresh's autorickshaw before her very eyes. She had gone to her father's place asking for help, but her brother had thrown her out without listening to her. A few days ago a part of the asbestos roof on their house had been blown away in a storm. She was trying to find some children she could teach, and was working in a tailor's shop stitching falls on saris.

Suresh started becoming restless after she left. What was she doing? What a difference between what he had hoped for and what had come to pass! Suresh hit his head against the steel door of the small room.

All of a sudden Sebati stopped coming to visit him. Sunu Malik, who stayed near Sebati's house, came once. He blurted out that Sebati was in jail. Suresh was anxious to learn the details, but the boy had not been able to provide any more information. This made Suresh even more nervous.

But what was he hearing now? So Sebati had had to stoop to doing this at last? He had been jailed because he killed a man to protect her honour, and yet....Something seemed to stick in his throat.

"Sir wants you...in his room," the constable was telling Suresh, pointing a finger at him. Suresh was taken aback. He forgot about watering the plants and stared at the constable. Suresh had aged ten years in the course of one day.

"Go over there," said the assistant jailor, lifting his head and motioning with his eyes towards the adjacent room. Suresh turned. The room was small and narrow, and quite dark. Someone was sitting on a low stool at the far side of the room near the window. Who was it? All his instincts were aroused. Sebati! Or was it something in the shape of Sebati! Was it alive or an image? Suresh stayed near the door.

The slight mass of darkness shaped like Sebati swayed a bit and stood up. Even though he had not looked directly at her, Suresh was convinced it was Sebati. He took a couple of steps and leaned against the left wall,

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his hands against the wall and his head slumped a bit to the right. Sebati stood on the left facing him, about three or four feet away. Suresh could not look in her direction. The mild pain he had been feeling in his chest since the day before seemed to have greatly increased. Standing still, he clenched his teeth and tried to bear it.

"Pray listen to me!" The soft voice created a great deal of agitation within him, but nothing showed on his face. Nor did his stance change.

"Listen. Look at me." There was an intense force in those few soft and soothing words which compelled Suresh to straighten up. His palms, pressed against the wall, moved slowly out in front of him. He turned and looked at Sebati. At first he could see only her profile. Then he tried to make out her face, noticing her hair, which had been pulled behind her ears and tied, and her naked ringless ears. After that, his restless eyes searched out hers.

"I've been in jail for the past three months," Sebati said in a calm voice. Suresh chose not to answer. He waited to hear what was coming next.

"I kept running to the police station everyday after you were put in the lock-up. I pleaded with everyone in the police station to be allowed to meet you. They sent me back four days in a row. But, on the fifth, I was determined to meet you."

'Why do you come everyday? Your husband''s going to be hanged the A.S.I. said after some time.

—I want to meet him for a moment. We'll hire a lawyer,' I replied hurriedly.

—Hunh! So you've got a lot of money with you. Let's see how much you have," he said.

—I kept quiet. I didn't have any money with me.

—'Take this and have some snacks and tea.' He took out two ten-rupee notes from his pocket and handed them to me.

—I stayed standing without uttering a word. He looked at me for a full two minutes. Then he sent the constable to get two cups of tea. After the constable left, he got up from his chair and came near me.

—'Leave now. Come back at around nine thirty or ten in the evening. Leave. I'll see what I can do at that time,' he said. I didn't know what to do.

—'What's the matter with you? Don't you understand what I'm saying? Or are you trying to act dumb? Come in the evening. You ought to be grateful that I haven't transferred him to the jail yet. Do you understand me? Go. Remember, you have to come at ten. Otherwise, forget about meeting him,' said the A.S.I firmly, in a serious and low voice.

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—I left and went back at ten in the evening, as he had instructed. He was alone, restlessly moving around on the veranda. He called to me to go inside a room as soon as he saw me. The next morning I found out when I met you that you'd been locked up only two or three rooms away. I had to return to the police station the next few days along with a lawyer, but the lawyer wasn't any good and couldn't do anything. More money was needed for a good one. You were sent to the jail in the meantime." Sebati rested for a while.

Suresh had been listening until then with bated breath. He sighed deeply and looked at Sebati more carefully. She had grown thinner and looked much older.

"The other day I pleaded with the A.S.I. to introduce me to someone in the jail and to help me meet you. Initially, he said he couldn't be of any help, but I kept pestering him. Then he asked me to come late in the evening; he said that he would explore some possibilities. There was another person with him when I went in the evening. He introduced him as the assistant jailor. The A.S.I. was alone when I reached the police station the next morning. The other man was not there. I asked him when the other man would come.

— The A.S.I, asked me to wait. I sat on a bench. An hour passed. Two hours. But there was no sign of the other man.

— I lost my patience and asked him again. For some reason, he became very angry, shouting. 'Am I hiding him in my pocket? What can I do if he doesn't turn up? Go away. Get lost. Don't disturb me, I'm telling you.'

— I replied haughtily that I was not going to leave. I insisted he should ask him to come, that I had to talk to him. I was insistent and moved near his table.

— He shouted. 'You bloody wretched woman, are you going to leave now or do you want to see what I'll do to you?' He got up and came towards me as he said this. He poked his baton into my abdomen with all his strength. I fell on my side on the table. All of a sudden, I noticed the glass paperweight on the table. The A.S.I, used to move it around with his fingers as he talked to people. I picked it up and struck at his forehead with it, splitting it open. A thin line of blood trickled down his face. Forget about what happened after that. I've been sentenced for six months." Sebati fell silent.

The pain inside Suresh's chest suddenly vanished. Something was a great deal more painful: the realization that something worse than the death sentence or life imprisonment been ordained for them both. The realization paralyzed him. He kept staring at Sebati like an imbecile.

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"Why did you do something like this, Sura? Why did you do it? What would we have lost if I had gone three or four times to Tulu Seth? We would have had our autorickshaw back. We could have raised a family some day. We might have lived a contented life. What has happened now? Who knows how many days, months or years will pass this way? Just to meet you once, who knows how many nights..." Sebati fell quiet and covered her face with both her palms. The grief she was suppressing made her shake all over.

Suresh felt a sudden chill, as if he was being frozen in packs of ice. He closed his eyes. The pyre of dead and ineffectual wishes was burning inside him. He crossed the distance of three to four feet between Sebati and himself in a stride and clasped her to his chest. It was as if he had clung to the dreams that had escaped both of them. Their tear-filled eyes were close to each other.

"Sir!" The assistant jailor raised his face when he heard Suresh's voice. He stared at them with questioning eyes. Suresh stood in front, with Sebati half-hidden behind him.

"Sir! The child is mine!" Suresh said, as he pulled Sebati beside himself, holding her right hand.

The eyes of the assistant jailor became more focused and his brows were furrowed. He was about to blurt out a question—"How...?"—but the words died on his tongue. He kept staring at them.

"Sir, this child is ours—Sebati's and mine." Suresh locked eyes with the assistant jailor and pronounced the words as if he was letting the whole world know the truth.

Translated from Oriya by Ashok K. Mohanty ❑

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The Sluice

Pon Sourirajan

I reached *Madagu*, the sluice, the structure with shutter gates to release water to the irrigation canal from the river. It was a midnight of the mid-summer with full moon atop the sky. The harvested fields around wore a barren look. As far as the eyes could stretch it was a vast spread of dry land. No one was seen moving around. "Trr ... Trr...", the unnerving screech of an owl from the graveyard. In response to it barked a dog from the slums nearby. Those noises in that otherwise peaceful vast wilderness failed to deter me. I looked at the sluice. I felt in me a piety spreading at the sight of a deity. A parched dry riverbed extended beyond that. I went near the eastern corner of the sluice. I sat on my knees. With my face sunk to its corner I cried. Gently I moved up to sit on it. I wept within me. I recollected things that happened that evening.

"*Mattalam muzhanga Varisangam nindrooda*" (The drums beat, the conch shells sounded), the divine nuptial poem rent the air. The rendering was by a music troupe at the wedding reception arranged by my father-in-law, the Director of the Azhiyur Sugar Mills. "Hello Sekar! Great guy! You were talking Marxism but caught hold of a 'big' wealthy hand", saying it with a big smile my friend 'Moscow' presented me with a book titled Lenin. "Mister, a small correction. Your friend has not caught hold of 'big' hand but a beautiful hand", said Miss Vanaja, a college mate and the bridesmaid to Valliyammai, the bride who was standing by my side. Listening to them all, and looking at me, the bridegroom, through the corner of her eyes, the bride Valliyammai was gently smiling. Noticing in her hand a book *Gandhiji and Human Life* gifted by somebody, I responded with a smile. Amidst such gifts and comments; pranks and mocking, pleasantries and greetings, a girl came near us. She turned towards me. A letter in an envelope strapped to the clip of a pen was in her hands. Hesitantly she was looking here and there. When I realised that her face was familiar, she said, "Arundati

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sends this to you." Then she vanished in the crowd of women around. I noticed Arundati's beautiful handwriting on the envelope. I remembered her tender fingers that used to write so beautifully. I had seen them long back. They all came to my mind's eye. "This is our Panchayat Union Chairman Mr. Somasundaram," a stentorian voice drew my attention and it rather startled me. I lifted up my head and said "*Vanakkam*". My father-in-law, along with an elderly person, stood before me. The pen and the letter in my hand reached my coat pocket in one moment. I shook hands and spoke something to them and saw them off.

"Arundati! ...yes! When I saw her at the Railway Station last month how grown-up she was. But was she the small, young girl whom I had seen in Puliyur when I was a teacher there!", I was telling myself.

I served as a teacher in the Puliyur 'big' school. There was another school nearby. It had primary classes up to Fifth Standard. My school had classes from Sixth to Eighth. So ours was called 'big' school. May be because I was working in the big school the villagers treated me as 'big.' Their regard and respect for me could have been for other reasons too. One reason could be my consoling them and talking to them with an open mind about their problems which they faced, but could not find expression as a silent mass. Another reason could be that even as an orphan, I had been extending to the needy, interest-free loans out of the savings from my salary.

There came a day when I was living so. It was Fifteenth August, the day when every school was to celebrate the Independence Day. Both the schools did not bother much about identifying chief guests to hoist the national flag and address the students on the special day. Headmasters of both the schools jointly planned and smoothly exchanged one of their teachers. According to that plan, I had the honour of unfurling the national tricolour and address the primary school students.

I made a speech about something. The Headmaster appreciated me. He said that my way of addressing suited the children. He appreciated all the teachers the same way. When I was about to leave, a girl came in front of me. She was reciting what I had quoted from Poet Bharati. She sang, "*Paadaham ceybavarai-k-kandaal, Nee bayam kollal aagaadu Paappa*" (*young girl, do not be afraid of those who wronged you*). I thought I had seen her somewhere frequently. Yes! With books in her hands, on the road to Pullur, walking fast with little steps, she used to stride along. I, who used to sit near the *Madagu* every evening and spend time watching the open fields and the sky, had seen her often. I used to lose myself at the sight of the whirling waters gushing out of the sluice gates from the river and the scenic green fields that stretched as far as one's eyes could reach and also the beautiful dusky sky in its splendid red at the horizon. I was also attracted to the tender beauty

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of the small girl who appeared to me like Nature herself walking. My enthusiasm knew no bounds to talk something to her when she came towards me, as one who liked my singing. "Do you study here?", I asked her.

The Headmaster intervened. "Yes, Sekar! Smart girl. She comes from Pullur. Quite agile and brilliant. She can sing well too! Arundati! Come on, sing that '*Muruga! Muruga! Muruga*' song", he asked her to sing. It was already one 'o clock. He also forgot that the chocolates distributed one each to every child had induced appetite. This concern lasted only till she opened her mouth. Her small, reddish lips parted to sing. The moment the song began I forgot myself. It was like a red flower with just two petals swayed by a tender breeze. The tiny lips were opening and closing. As if honey was flowing drop by drop, the chosen classical Tamil words were flowing away as a song. "*Karudi karudi kavalai-p-paduvaar kavalai-k-kadalai kadiyum Vadivel Muruga*" (Oh! Lord Vadivel Muruga who surmount the Ocean of Worry that affects those who get immersed in worries), she sang raising her voice. She held her breath taking her voice to a high pitch. It even moved up her waist bones. "Oh no! no! young girl ! stop!" I felt like saying so. The song was over. I looked around. Children surrounding us also came closer. I took from the table a flower bouquet. I presented it to her and clapped my hands. Other children too clapped. Lowering her head in humility she quietly moved away.

"Hey! Arundati! What is this? Going without wishing him?" the Headmaster chided gently. Resting the bouquet on her chest, she folded her hands to bow to me. Saying '*Vanakkam*' she vanished.

She went out of my sight but not from my mind. I came to the sluice the next Monday evening and sat there chewing the cud of memories. Her inquisitive eyes, the song that appeared to be coming from a red flower and the sight of her going away lowering her head down, all of them came to my mind. The sluice was at the border that separated both Pullur and our village Puliyur. I was lost in the splendour of the usual river-flow with gentle splashes; the hopping little 'Kendai' fishes and the water snakes that were resting their heads on the shutter gates to prey on them; the emerald glow of the green worms sparkling in the evening sun on the blades of the wild grass on the banks of the river; the frogs that were gasping and waiting on the bunds to devour those green worms. I was totally lost. Suddenly in the running water I noticed a moving and smiling green shadow. I turned around. All in smiles, Arundati was standing there. Wearing a green-silk-long-skirt and green-silk-blouse, she looked like an emerald statue. With giggles she asked me, "Tell me Sir! You are watching something for a long time. Right from the time I started from the school, I have been watching

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you. Without lifting up your head, you continue to look at the river. What is there, Sir? May I also see that...Sir?"

I looked at her. I saw her before me and behind her the vast stretch of green fields. All merged in green. It appeared to me as if every movement in the greenery around was that of hers. "You can not see Arundati" I said.

"Why not...Sir?" the disappointment was evident on her face. As if I had woken up from a dream just then, I asked her, "What did I say Arundati? Did I say that you can not see?" Then I went on to say, "Yes! See there. A hole. A crab went inside. That is why I said you can not see that," I tried to convince her with a satisfying answer.

"When I was still young, I too was like that Sir! Frightened at the sight of the bearded beggar in the evenings, I used to run back home to hide behind my mother. I also used to see from behind her whether he was out of sight," saying so, she was also eagerly watching the crab's hole. A crab was peering through again and again, popping up from the hole. The crab's two small cylindrical eyes appeared like two green unripe pepper stuck to two needles.

"Hmm ...?", I pretended as if I was taken by surprise. Then I asked her affectionately, "Come on. Sing that song. Let us see!"

"See? How can you 'see' a song Sir?" She giggled and looked around. No one was coming from either side. She sang. Again those lips quivered to lilt. Evening sun, gentle breeze, babbling brook, spreading green, vast sky; with all these her voice blended. I felt gravitated towards them. The song ended. I came back to the earth.

"It is getting late. Amma will be looking for me," saying so she left. I was sitting there watching the walking beauty, that green doll. She was going alone along that mud road. She was looking back every now and then. If she had been a grown-up girl, something could have been woven like 'love' and so on. But she was a kid not even aware of any such thing. I watched her going away till she went out of my sight. Darkness surrounded me.

I used to anxiously wait for the arrival of Saturday and Sunday. But thereafter I started worrying as to why those holidays come at all. Such was the change in my heart. Every evening we used to talk so many things sitting by the sluice. She was in the habit of making enquiries to me about so many things. "Sir! Why did God create the woodpecker?" she asked me one day.

"Why did he create...?" I pondered. It appeared like I was meditating over it for a very long time. She had left by then.

The next day, on seeing her, pretending to be angry over her leaving the previous day without taking leave, I turned my face away from her. Instead, I was looking towards the river. She came and stood behind me

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and started singing "*Karudi karudi kavalaip-paduvaar*". "Oh! It may leave you gasping for breath", I quipped and turned to her. She stopped singing and started laughing. I could not pretend anymore to be angry. After seeing that laughter, I too laughed heartily.

"You see, Sir! One morning there was a '*tok tok*!' noise from a tree in our garden at our place. I went and saw. I saw a bird landing on the bole of a tree, clutching to it and hitting the bark on the trunk with its beak. It was like a labourer climbing up a coconut tree with a towel-turban tied around his head. I was watching it quietly (She narrated it in a hushed tone, as if the bird was there very much before our eyes). Turning back and looking around and moving up, the bird was pecking at the tree '*tok tok*!'. Then pecking continuously at a particular place without moving away a bit, the bird made a hole. Found a black worm. Pecked at the worm with its beak, piercing it. Then it flew away with the worm. Its pecking with its beak '*tok-tok*' on the tree was like the doctor testing my mother tapping 'tok-tok' on her back to diagnose her disease. "TB has affected your chest bones. You must go for a surgical treatment," the doctor told my mother. She was operated upon in the hospital. The doctor gave her injections. I was there all the time, with my mother crying. When she left the hospital, my mother paid one hundred rupees. This woodpecker too was investigating like a doctor for TB care, tapping to test and locate the exact place where worms were found. Located the prey's hideout. Drilled a hole and devoured the worm. Then I thought. God created woodpecker as a doctor to cure trees from diseases like TB that might afflict the trees. I shared this with my friends Karpagam and Malini. They made fun of me calling me mad and went on to play. I was a little hesitant to tell my lady teacher. But I was eager to tell you this. If you had known the answer, you might have said derisively "I know that!" To avoid being derisively mocked at by you, I put a question. But you were keeping quiet looking at the sky," she went on, all in one breath.

"Oh! Is it so! Very good. Now only I get to know the reason for God creating a woodpecker", I said approvingly and gently patted her on her back and asked her, "Do you know why God created you?" I gave a pause.

She was surprised and was looking askance at me without moving her inquisitive little black eyes.

"Do you know why? To find out the logical answer yourself and teach all the teachers the reason behind God's creation of a woodpecker", I said in a jocular vein.

"Oh! No", as if peeved she went off in a pretentious huff. I was surprised and amused! I saw in her the future Madame Curie. How did

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I fail to read the mind of this child in spite of my being a trained teacher! At the first instance, had I shown interest, with the curiosity to ask her "why did God create a woodpecker?", she might have felt happy and shared with joy her wonderful creation theory. I decided then that whether I knew the right answer or not, I would always make her happy by asking her to give the answer herself. I also decided to listen to her explanation attentively showing curiosity and evincing interest.

It was another day. Sitting beside me, she quizzed, "Sir! Do you know why the bark of a tree is rough and coarse?" Remembering the snub I got earlier, I asked her immediately, "why?"

"If it itches in our back, we use our hands and scratch our back. Or else, somebody does it for us. But who will do it for cows and sheep? That is why God has created barks of the trees coarse. I saw that Sir! Cattle were rubbing their back against the tree-barks in a coconut grove," she went on citing an evidence.

I wanted to contradict it pointing out that the surface of the trunk of a coconut tree was coarse due to its shedding of its fronds. I found her empathetic view was better than my intellectual viewpoint. I hugged her to express my appreciation saying "Oh little darling!" I knew not what else to do then. Probably, she felt the hug to be that of her mother's warmth or something like that. I was not sure. But she remained calm and quiet. "Yes! Arundati. It is getting late. Go home now," I sent her away. Then I left for my room. I could have spent all my time looking at her eyes that had a blend of inquisitive and philosophical look. Had I spent all my life that way I might not have been left a disturbed man.

No such opportunity any more. As found in fiction, neither a villain nor fate came in between. Only my eagerness to go for higher studies came in the way of our friendship. Determined to pursue higher education joining a college, I left that village on the first of July. Just in June the previous month, Arundati was admitted in Class Six in our school after her completing Class Five. That is, she became a student of the 'big' school after passing out from the primary school.

On the day I left the school, I was given a customary 'Farewell' in the afternoon. The same evening, I left for Chennai by the Five O'clock train. So, naturally, to see me off, some of the teachers with the Headmaster and all the students came up to the Railway Station. Arundati was also there with her classmates. Murugan, a student, held my hands and sobbed calling me, "*Anna*! My dear elder brother!" He went on crying. I consoled him with a pat on his back. I said, "Don't worry! I have told Mr. Kumarasamy. He will help you to meet your need." Another student Singaravelu was in tears. He said, "Sir! Hereafter we won't quarrel with each other." I recalled my

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going on fast that day when he quarrelled with Kannan. Thus when I was consoling and comforting one after the other, the train arrived. Boys were surrounding me. So, Arundati could not come near me. My fellow teachers and some parents were talking to me, some of them giving advice. I too could not go towards her. Wiping tears from her eyes, she was standing with her friends near a Banyan sapling. Without moving from the place where I was standing, I said '*Vanakkam*' with folded hands. I was looking at the place where girls stood. Noticing me and not able to contain her increasing tears, Arundati put her head down. She was apparently controlling herself from breaking down.

Tears welled up in my eyes too. To get in to the train, I took to the steps of the coach and stood there at the entrance. By then some students had kept inside the compartment my luggage — the suitcase and the beddings. Then Arundati came running towards me and handed me a packet. She was crying within. I held her hand and said, "Why Arundati? I will come back, after my studies. I will be back here and teach you." "Sure Sir?" she exclaimed. "Yes! Sure" I assured her. Her eyes brightened. Wiping away the rolling tears she tried to smile with glee in her glistening eyes.

The train moved. I went in to my coupe and looked out through the window. All those gathered were waving their hands bidding farewell. I was also waving my hands at them. The train gathered momentum and picked up speed. One after the other everyone who came to see me off at the station started melting away. Without moving away Arundati alone stood looking towards me. The train moved away farther and farther. She was dimming from my sight and grew into a thin smoke. The train that sped fast like Time separated her both from my view and me. Immersed in the thought of the days I had spent in that village, I did not even notice our train reaching Tanjavur Junction.

The packet Arundati gave me was in my hands. I went in and occupied a seat and opened that packet slowly. Curd-rice was there. Just a little portion of it was seen taken away from a corner. Apparently a small quantity of the food was pinched off. It became clear to me; that was her lunch; for the tiny stomach of that little girl. The thought of her remaining hungry in the afternoon to feed me in the night moved me. I perceived the depth of her affection for me. I openly cried. "Don't cry my son! Is it the rice packed by your mother? Come on eat it. You will cry like this. Then, after getting a job and after getting married, you will forget everything. My son was also like you. Now he asks what a father is," said an elderly man giving vent to his feeling in the guise of consoling me. Was it the truth of life?

In the Chennai ambience, going through its fret and fury amidst its restless and strenuous routine, passing through the sleepless college studies,

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in the midst of competitions, rivalries, moments of fame, popularity and jealousy, during the first few months, the thought of Arundati came to my mind every now and then. I felt sorry for not going to her house and failing to get to know and to have come in contact with her mother, the only parental care in her life. It did not occur to me to write to her at her school address. But, occasionally, I was writing to the helpful Headmaster. I did not write to Arundati even once, I did not know why. After some time her memory came only once in a while. Later, that too stopped. I had almost forgotten her.

Six years ran off very fast. I was writing my M.Sc. Examinations. It was just a day or two for the examinations to be over. I received an Express Letter from the Headmaster.

"Dear Sekar,

I am in receipt of your letter. I wish you all the best in your M.Sc. examinations. You have asked me about what you could do after your studies. I have decided about it. The Director of Azhiyur Sugar Mills is of your caste. He has assured me of getting you a job in his Mill. In the meantime let me assign you a small work. Your examinations get over on Saturday. Do they not? Go to Queen Mary's College on Sunday. I am sending along with this letter a visiting card. Give it to the Hostel Warden without fail. The next day, board the evening train and come here. Let us decide about your job after your arrival here."

After reading the letter, I wondered "Why does he ask me to meet the Hostel Warden of Queen Mary's College? It may be possible that she too knows somebody in the Sugar Mills." My last examination got over. The next day I went to Queen Mary's College. I handed over the visiting card to the Hostel Warden. I did not know the reason why she was looking at me up and down. "Are you Mr. Sekar? Come on. You had come to our College once. You participated in an oratorical contest. You had even bagged the prize ... Don't you remember?", the warden asked me. Without even waiting for a reply the warden said, "Please wait here, let me come back." Then the warden went inside her room. She was seen saying something to a person and sending him away.

I was sitting in a sofa in the visitor's room. I had kept awake for many days preparing for the examinations. So, I was feeling sleepy. Suddenly I recalled from my memory the topic of the Oration Contest. "Whom does the future belong to – Mahatma Gandhi or Karl Marx?" A girl contestant asserted that the future belonged to Gandhiji. But she got defeated at my hands. My heart that did not think of her till then began to think of her thereafter. On the dais, she stood like a golden statue clad in a white saree.

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She advanced arguments one after the other, gently but effectively emphasizing how Gandhiji's principle alone could save the world in future. The points she stressed came to my mind one by one. With convincing counter-points and the felicity of words, I won the contest. Even after the defeat, without being jealous, unlike other competitors, she told me with a serene calm: "Mr. Sekar! Somehow I might have lost today. But one day you will surely realise that only Gandhiji's ideals can save the world. When you feel so, please inform me wherever I am. That alone can be the best prize to me. Now you can collect this prize." The Chinese aggression on India that had started just then made me wonder whether she was right. I did not give her any reply, as I was clueless.

The moment I recollected it, I got up to tell the warden that I wanted to meet that girl if she was there. I stepped ahead a foot or two. She herself came. It was the very same girl. She came before me 'clad in white as if adorned in white snow', the same way she appeared at the oration contest. Seeing the girl, the hostel warden also came from her room. "Mr. Sekar! This is the girl who lost to you in the contest then. Miss. Valliammai. She is competing again. I pray to God for her not to lose now," said the warden. Looking at us, she paused for a while. Valli's head tilted down as she blushed.

"Now, I am not here to compete with anyone. I think losing is better than defeating. In fact, going by the times, it appears Miss. Valliammai has won," I gave a pause.

Without uttering anything, she was listening, with her head held down still. The Hostel Warden tried to say something. For a while there was a silence.

"Mr. Sekar! This girl's father is the Director of Azhiyur Sugar Mills; very rich; a good person; attracted towards Gandhiji; took part in Salt Satyagraha and was even lathi-charged. He has named his daughter after the valiant woman and the great Tamil Social Activist Valliammai, who served the masses and died in South Africa. You can fathom his nature from that. It would be better if you get to know her before you go to Puliyur. That is why this arrangement," she said and looked behind, turning her head. A lady brought three cups of milk. Valli served the cups to the warden and me.

"She won't take Coffee or Tea. She is an exception in this Hostel. But exemplary in being studious and scoring high marks," the warden went on. Sipping the milk, I was looking at Valliammai. She was in smiles, but could not meet my eyes. Modestly, her head went down further.

The whole of next day, I was preoccupied with the homeward journey. I boarded the train that night. The next morning, in the early hours the train reached our village railway station. There were some people to

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receive me. "Come on. Come... Come. This man will carry your luggage. The train will be stopping here for some more time because there is a crossing. Get down slowly", said a teacher affectionately. More than affection, I could see a kind of respect in his attitude. I looked at the Banyan tree in front of me. I could remember that it was the sapling I saw six years back. Immediately the memories of Arundati flashed. I had decided to go to the school somehow and enquire about her discreetly. 'But she may not be there in that school. She may be studying in Tanjavur. Will her mother be alive? Will she be continuing her studies or would she have dropped out,' like waves, many such thoughts crossed my mind while looking at that Banyan tree.

"What happened, Sekar? Why are you standing still looking at that Banyan tree? The Director of the Sugar Mill is waiting for you in his car. Come on," the teacher beckoned bringing me back to this world again.

I saw a Khadi-clad person all in white looking at me. He was standing next to his blue car. His appearance belied my notion of a director. I expected him to be obese, a paunchy one. In fact, he looked like a scholar attracted towards Gandhiji. I folded my hands in reverence without even realising what I was doing. I said "*Vanakkam*".

"Come! Come!" holding my hands he took me to his car and sat down. I also sat in. We went to *Pannaiyar's* (landlord of a large farm) house. Household members and others there received me. The Headmaster took me alone and said, "Marriage shall be in the month of *Vaikasi* (second half of May and first half of June). Hope you do not have any objection". Valliammai's simplicity, humility, pleasing manners and beautiful face came before my mind's eye for a moment. I think I gave a nod to say 'yes'. Somehow that day passed by. Next morning the *Pannaiyar* was to take me in his car to Chennai. He planned to meet some people regarding his Sugar Mills. "Let me come by train as car journey does not suit me", I said. It appeared that he did not like it. Even then, he said "Okay, in that case let me put you in the evening train and let me come by car. There at Chennai, let me pick you up from Egmore Railway Station". He took me to his mill. He was explaining many things the entire day. We had lunch at noon in the mill guest-house. In the evening I went to the railway station directly from the mill. A train came from Tanjavur. I was asking myself, "Will Arundati be coming by this train?" My expectation was not belied. She got down from the last compartment. On seeing me she rushed towards me like a kid. Noticing the director by my side, she hesitated. She moved away to go beneath the banyan tree. Another girl who came slowly behind her joined her. Arundati was telling her something. She too was looking at me. The director who was with me did not know anything about our innocent

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mutual affection. I hesitated to go and talk to her who was then a grown-up girl.

It also appeared that *Pannaiyar* had noticed her alighting from the train and coming towards me. He might have even seen my looking at her eagerly. The usual pleasantness in his face was showing as if mixed with some bitterness. Five more minutes were there for the train to depart. All those five minutes she was waiting for me standing in the same place. Unable to muster courage, I was merely lowering my head like a coward. I was afraid of introducing her as my former student. I was even afraid of showing that I knew her. Finally, even without talking to her, I took the train and departed.

I arrived at Chennai by the train. As promised he was there. From then on, I lost my blessedness of being single. All the time, someone or the other would be around me. They were prepared to do anything for me. I wanted to go in person to Arundati at least to hand her over the wedding invitation. That too did not materialise.

After a few days, I reached Puliyur by an evening train. The next morning my marriage took place. The same evening there was the wedding reception. Those gathered presented me with many gifts. One among the gifts was that particular pen. That was dearer to my heart. That was my own old pen. The same one I had given to Arundati. When she joined my class, in appreciation of her first essay in composition, I gave her that pen as the first prize. The girl who gave back that pen with the letter was the same one who was standing with Arundati under the Banyan tree at the railway station the other day. When she was hesitating to give me that letter, I said "Give me that. Is it greetings?" and collected it myself boldly. Arundati's beautiful handwriting adorned it.

My heart was beating eagerly to read it. One after the other there were many things at the function. Dinner followed the reception. After the dinner joyous chatting of friends. Playing cards. Then cinema. Finally at 11.30 p.m. I was left alone. Locked myself inside the room. Switched off the tube light. A green zero watt lamp was on. I removed my coat and had it hung. Took out from my shirt the pen and the letter. I looked at the pen for a while. In that I saw her tender fingers. How many of Nature's truths she might have recorded with that pen?" asking myself so, I opened the letter.

"Dear....!

"How shall I address you? How would you like me to address you? I am desirous of addressing you "My Dear Sir!" Let me address you the way I wish. This at least I hope would be admitted!

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" 'Sure', saying so you boarded the train. I do not know why my heart fails to forget that magical word. I see our sluice everyday. There, at Chennai don't you have such sluices? May be. Amidst all your studies, even if you forget me, any one of the sluice gates there might remind you of me. I used to think like that. When I go to our sluice, I stand there hesitantly. I will be longing for your presence as before. I used to be short of breath singing the lines, '*Karudi Karudi*'. I would be longing to hear you, insisting, "No paappa! ... Stop....", and for your caressing hug with care and concern. I have memorised several of your favourite poems by Bharati. I now know more than a hundred verses from *Aazhvaar Paasuram* (The sacred hymns of Vaishnava Saints of Tamil Nadu). I have read many of the poems of Tirunaavukkarasar. Why have I read all of them? I repeatedly recited musically all those poems everyday like mad, at the sluice. Who is it for? I do not know now.

"I got down from the train that day. Quite unexpectedly, I saw 'him' whom my eyes longed to see for six long years. Your black moustache, your pants and suit did not hide my eyes. I forgot for a moment that I am a girl, a grown up one. I came almost running towards you. I went past all the ten coaches of the train hoping your arms will spread for me. But you stood there still as though you had not noticed me. I was taken aback.

"I hesitated wondering whether it could be somebody else. Having my head lowered, I saw your feet. They were the same feet I had seen many a day. Your feet did not ditch me. I was waiting, putting up a brave front. My friend was hurrying me up. I had told her about you every now and then. "He is my 'Sir', Please wait. He is talking to somebody. He will come", saying so, I asked her to wait. My heart was in great agony and was eagerly waiting to hear from you at least one word, "Okay?" But till the end you did not even look at me and boarded the train without uttering anything. The same railway station that gave me a determination to nurture your care, as a 'crush' was bearing witness to its getting crushed under the same Banyan tree in the same station.

"I was looking at the train till it moved away from sight. When you boarded the train for studies and moved away farther and farther, I felt you had moved more and more into my heart and stay put there. Seeing you again leaving for Chennai, I felt the train was snatching away my idol that stood firm in my heart.

"My friend admonished me. I wept. Then I heard of your marriage proposal. Fortunately for me, a relative of my mother had come from Mumbai. We would be accompanying him selling away our land at any price we get. Along with my mother I too would be going away. What could

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be there on this earth for me? I wanted to give back to you in person the pen you gave me. But I could not. Thinking of you often, I had written so many things using this pen. It was like writing through my heart.

"Now, my heart has crumbled. What is there for me to write about anymore? At least it may be of use to you. What else I can give you? What is there except this pen, my soul's tool that belonged to you?

"I stand still as a sluice remaining where I am. But you have deserted me escaping like the swirling waters flooding through the sluice. Alone and like a stone, withstanding 'Time' that passed like flooding waters, I remain chastised. Is that what we call chastity?

"Just a request. If at any time you happen to go near that sluice, where we used to meet each other everyday, kindly stand for a while and give a discreet kiss to its eastern corner and go. I had been covering with my face the corner you used to occupy everyday, extending love. I had been cleansing the place with my tears, tending kisses. Lighting my soul, I had been performing *puja*.

"I remain. I shall remain forever.

Yours ever,
Arundati."

I stood up from the sluice gate... Gave an intense look towards the eastern corner. My Arundati appeared there as a pretty soul, coming on earth, assuming a form, bearing a lovelorn look in the gleaming black eyes on the cute round face, the beauty of which exceeded an artist's reach but appeared only in dreams. I knelt down and kissed the spot. My head hit the corner. That apparition had vanished. How long was I crying? Seeing a fox couple that came howling from afar, I stopped crying. I looked around. By then, the moon had gone. Realising with a heavy heart my failure to understand the way a loving girl's heart was evolving, I left the sluice.

Translated from Tamil by K.John Sundar ❑

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Taints

Radhika Anand

My son has three eyes.

Eleven fingers, I'd seen. One ear, I'd heard of. But three eyes?? I could only think of pointed hats and crooked brooms as I peered atheistically into the incubator. And all three were there. Rigmaroling, as if to a jazz band, in spirited, uncoordinated moves on a starkly prim nose. Poor wretch, consoled Sister. Erroneous, marvelled the doctor. Mine, defied I. And lovely, despite it all. The lump in my throat became larger as I scooped the little bundle preciously into my arms...

Joshua's playing in the garden. His favourite lunch of figs and honey toast awaits him. The tutor will be here shortly. And then the physician. My Joshua's very disciplined for a six-year-old.

And vigilant too.

Mira cursed herself for his bane. Women have a feisty conscience. But blame-games resolve nothing. A lesson she was to learn the hard way. Chants, fasts and celibacy perhaps brought her peace of mind, but never the piece of luck she so inanely sought. He would always look the same, the doctors had warned us. Even if the third iris were surgically removed, it would grow back. Apart from endangering his eyesight permanently. We'll live with it, I comforted my wife. And myself. A lie so rehearsed that it sprang out on the slightest push, and sometimes even without it. Foolishly. Particularly when he stared like that.

A fair, bright lad. Always in clean knickers and polished boots. With the most generous smile in the neighbourhood. Then why did Joshua have no friends? Children were frightened of him. He haunts the parks after dark, they gossiped. And cast spells on innocent intruders with that ominous third eye. Some even claimed to have heard him wailing. I had seen him.

Tears flowed only from the two regular eyes.

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Candles make him happy. Strangely. Ordinary, white candles. The nursery is full of them. Only them, in fact. Burning white, throughout the day. Smoke and wax whiten the walls. The sun cleans them with its white mop; and the rascals rub smothering white into them again. Joshua says white's beautiful.

I long for colour.

Dr. Douglas oils his eyes. Father Jacob oils my conscience. There is guilt only where there is sin, he says. And sin is everywhere. In Seed. In Beast. In Man. It instructs the cosmos....I like listening to him. The boiling cobwebs in my head seem to simmer down. Joshua will be redeemed. One day. For his sin. For his blemish. For his anguish. For his non-conformity. I shall pray for him.

And the cosmos will move.

Could he not see even with three eyes? The mildew in Mira's? And the cracks through which it seeped into her spirit? His sockets had begun to sink in. With the mindless looking. The head had begun to rot. With the pointless suffering. And it was deepening. To corrode his soul.

The Puritan in that Pagan.

I am not sinning. I am helping Joshua serve penance. And he understands. He cooperates. He quietly drinks the Holy Water. And smiles at me, graciously. His candles flicker. The sun walks in. And his eyes dance. Just as six years ago.

Because Father knows best.

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Jean Arasanayagam

Did You See the Peacocks, Hear Their Cries?

I am travelling the road not taken before in that
historical transition to the fortress of Neemrana
going back to a past which had been reduced to rubble.

Am I searching for a metaphor for my own
life that has to place stone upon stone, brick upon brick
to rebuild an edifice destroyed by time's desecration?

I search for something I have come a long way
to find, uncertain of whether I shall ever find it
but there are silent guides whom I follow, those who
know their unfaltering way through familiar mazes.

For them, unlike to me, a transient traveller,
this fortress palace is no prison,
it is a world within a world
set on this mountain far from
the plains looking down on a landscaped
map of spreading villages from where those
dancers had come up to twirl their supple
bodies, women who bore blazing firepots
on their heads or that man, the sweat
streaming down his cheeks and forehead
in rivulets standing with his slender feet
balanced on a bed of nails or on swords,
blades sharp and keen before the dance begins
with pain and ecstasy as the drums thud,
beat out their frenetic rhythm and the long
trumpets sound their plangent notes.

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I recall the ragas played on the strings
of the raven hatha which welcomed me to
the palace as I stood on the terrace overlooking
the landscape of scattered villages, houses, courtyards,
temples.

My thoughts move like calling flutes
from the waving branches of leaves
and blossoms in the courtyard of Moti
Mahal where birds cluster and where Jain
appears before me to guide me through mazes
and labyrinths.

On a high ledge among the latticed balconies
Shiva's trident is still, unmoving but instinct
with power.

This courtyard encloses the silence
of finished histories which I reawaken
feeling the breath of the past which I
summon to lead me without blindfolds
through unmapped time.

Who is there left to recount those
legends, those mythologies of dynasties
that ruled the bygone ages through wars,
defeat or victories or even through marriage
alliances between conquered and conqueror?

In my room at Moti Mahal, the room
with white lattice, padlocked from
the outside world I look upon the faces of
the Rana and his Rani, her face serene,
innocent, shut away from the turmoil
of the valley, high up here in this fortress;
the silk of her gold embellished sari still
gleams upon her body, her beringed hands
are held in a pose arranged by that anonymous
photographer.

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Did he come up to Neemrana borne in a
palanquin with his tripod and paraphernalia
or did he ride up on horseback, up, up
the winding roads from the village below?

The Rana and Rani watch my daily sorties
in and out of this sequestered room.

The Rana, every inch a ruler of his possessions,
power and arrogance in his stance,
eyes piercing with knowledge of his forebears
and his heritage, the legacy of an inheritance
bequeathed him, yet still to be protected by
battlements and look out towers manned by
vigilant sentries, bodyguards and private armies.

Now, only the replicas of those ferocious cannons
remain, the play things of that turbulent past,
set in the niches of the parapet walls
among the scurrying squirrels exploring
ledge after ledge, reaching to the topmost
pinnacles, carved balconies and rows of secret
rooms, twining creepers and tufts of slender
grasses springing out of stone crevices.

I traverse so many passages of dark
stone, labyrinthine, stairways, confusion of
mazes as footsteps and thoughts meander
at their own pace.

The hourglass has no place here,
the koel calls at dawn,
the turtle-doves and ash-doves fly over
green waters of a stagnant water tank with
a bas relief of cavorting monkeys.

I search for something I have never had
and find that which I had not hoped to find
in a secret alcove where the deities live within
the puja room generation after generation
when all the Ranas and the Ranis have left
this palace fortress.

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They have been my secret guides on this
transitional journey, they will always remain
even when I have gone away to that far
away home to which I belong.

As I journey back within this newly
discovered landscape of my mind,
I hear the peacocks' cries.

The Aunt Vaasanthi's Story

I was brought up in a large Brahmin household,
a household filled with aunts, cousins, relatives,
my father an English teacher, enlightened, educated,
our lives ritualistic, we followed the inherited
vedic traditions.

I remember a festival
and my aunt, the aunt who was married
at the age of five, her husband ten years
old.

He died soon afterwards.
He drowned.
My aunt was widowed.

While she was playing one day,
she was dragged away,
the women threw her into a dark room.
"This is where you will live hereafter,"
they said, a saree nine yards long
thrown at her, her head tonsured,
her jewels removed.

The women of the household accepted it.
Was there no compassion?
No humanity?

My aunt accepted her fate, her karma.

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She now performed all the menial tasks
cooked, washed clothes and scrubbed vessels,
swept the courtyard,
worked from morning to night,
toiling from dawn to dusk at all the household
tasks.

No reprieve from her fate.

At that festival
I was then myself five years old—
I wore a skirt of silk.

When I prostrated myself before my aunt,
she who was covered from head to foot
swathed in the coarse cotton cloth of
her earth brown saree, her frail body
weighed down by its folds,
the poetry of all those years of joy
and growing wiped off the changing pages
of her face, leaving it empty of the stanzas
of her creating,

she touched with tremulous fingers, my skirt,
as if she were touching the newly opened
jasmine buds gathered for the morning pooja.

An expression of wonderment filled her eyes,
she had never felt that smoothness against
her own limbs.

Through the years her silken skin
golden as a fragrant sun-touched flower
spilling with pollen, cloaked by the years
to harsh withering, faded away.

I remember her eyes, her face.

She lived out her years,
the light gradually, painfully quenched,
the lamp wick drinking in the last vestiges
of precious oil dwindling in its earthen cusp.

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And then the wick burned out,
The oil used up.

She died a natural death,
but was there ever a life to end?

Or light? To diminish, die out, dimming,
dimmed?

Those once shed rays that spread a niggardly
radiance, did they ever dispel the grotesque
shadows our own lives cast, unskeining their
amorphous shapes in that obscure dark?

Were we ever alive? Awake?

Lunar Passage

Because she writhed in pain
when the moon touched her body every month
filling her panic thought with distorted visions,
a penance vow was made.

Carrying a new clay pot of smouldering
embers on her head, she was made to walk round
and round the temple veedhi feeling the spirits
of the deities pierce through her body's walls
the slokas of those divine utterances
cleansing the inner sanctum of her soul
soothing her pain racked body,

then
to lie prone, limbs outstretched
wrapped in her silken garments
impregnated with jasmine fragrance
from her crushed braid, incense touched
the gold at throat and wrist, necklaces and bracelets,
her quivering shadow pressed into that hallowed
temple earth, flesh-touched by other penance
seekers, their prayers, their vows entering

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through her pores, pleas that echo through
the years.

The pot still clasped within her hands
held close to breast,
fire-heat travelling through her veins
while her mother beseeched the deities she
daily prayed to, to take that lunar agony
away and dry those trembling tears,
the salve of prayers to calm her sweat-
stained brow.

Encircled by a throng of women bonded by
kinship, their powers—prayer enwrapping
that slender frame, her body tingling with
that utterance meant only for womens' ears.

Did those sacred words travel through
her veins and through the passage of her
body until that pain melted away?
Who knows?
That was the past.
Taboos perhaps stifled her thoughts
as she closed the door each month
leading to her sanctuary,
observing the ancient rituals of those
lunar days until the time arrived to bath
and purify herself bringing light
into days and nights of silence
dreaming her closely-guarded secrets.

It was she, this young and tender girl
who once, as a baby went through other
rituals.

Why?
She had to be reborn.

Foretold of her malefic influences,
taken to the temple for the enactment
of that special pooja, sold symbolically

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to the gods through the intermediaries of
the pusaris, nothing unusual in their lives,
a thousand, thousand others too, were, in this
manner, reborn,
slokas chanted
fervent prayers uttered
thevarams sung
plea after plea rising like incense
in the air, offerings made
the sacred fires lit,
pooja after pooja bound that girl-child
with jasmine garlands,
petals scattered upon her body
holy ash touching her unsullied brow
and then her birth, her life offered
once more in this new act of regeneration
to the highest bidder.

Who else but her parents, wait, with
arms outstretched to accept her, take her
once more into their lives, clasped close
to drink of her mother's fragrance soft
petals of milk touching her lips
curling round her tongue,
now reborn
now this new birth auspicious
emerging from the mystic womb
blessed by the familiar deities
making her passage smooth through
life, regenerated.

Who knows?
Pain is life.
The senses, newly awakened
flare in the growing seasons
blossoms edged with blood.

Flourish and spread their fragrance.

Until?

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Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar'

Virtue's Charioteer

Canto 1

Glory be to that sacred fire of piety wherever it burns in this universe.
Hail to that person who is resplendent in strength and courage.
A flower is worthy of worship, no matter on which stalk or jungle it blooms,
For wise men do not search for the origins of power and virtue.

He alone is most learned who cares not for the difference of high or low birth;
Most worthy of veneration is that person in whom there is compassion and virtue.

In the true Kshatriya's heart burns the fire of fearlessness;
The noblest Brahmin is he who is ruled by penance and sacrifice.

Luminous persons seek not honour from lineage and caste;
The respect they earn from the world is through their deeds.
Well may the world on inferior roots frown or approve,
True heroes, though, leave their tracks on the path of history.

His father was the Sun, and the chaste virgin Kunti his mother,
A wicker basket on the flowing stream was his cradle.
Reared in a charioteer's family, no mother's milk ever had he been fed,
Still did Karna emerge a hero wonderful among the youth of his time.

A body honed for battle, a heart full of emotion, and by nature generous,
Respecter of manhood and virtue was he, not of birth and lineage.
With a thorough acquisition of knowledge and practice of weaponry,
Did achieve self-improvement, Karna, on his own, of all his skills

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Far from the bustle of the city, the clamour of cityfolk,
In severe training body and soul was he immersed;
Absorbed in meditation intense, ever steeped in diligence,
Like a forest flower unseen by the eyes of the world, blossomed Kanaa.

Bloom not flowers merely in the gardens of kings;
Countless times do they blossom in groves far from towns.
Who shall understand this secret? Nature's paradox strange,
When she places in rags select gems of value rare?

How long can the sun hide behind a screen of clouds?
How long can a true warrior bear the disdain of the world?
Came the time one day when finally youth did awake,
And burst forth amidst everyone the first fire of manhood.

In the arena stood Arjuna, the occasion spectacular and novel,
When, from the crowd emerged suddenly Karna, armed with all his weapons,
Saying- "Why do you swell with pride at the mere adulation of people?
Arjuna! Your fame will in a moment now be ground to the dust.

"Whatever you have done I, too, can demonstrate;
Why, I can teach you some new skills, also.
Open your eyes and observe the magic of Karrna's hands;
Fie on the man who prides himself on cheap flattery."

So saying, began Karna exhibiting all the skills of war;
The crowd was stunned, all eyes wide and wonderstruck.
Spellbound, settled silence in four directions over the ocean of people,
With the only sound heard being the thunder-twang of Karna's bow.

As he turned, "Bravo, Bravo" hailed the crowd of men and women!
While heavy distress befell the leaders of the royal clans.
Drona, Bhishma, Arjuna—all paled, and into depression sank,
Except one Suyodhana, who came forward, exclaiming—"Hero, shabaash."

And then, when he, Karna, to a duel did challenge Partha,
Arjuna's Guru gestured to him to remain silent.
Kripacharya spoke up—"Listen heroic youth unknown,
Arjuna is the son of Pandu, the ornament of the Bharata dynasty.

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"A Kshatriya is he—a prince—he will not fight without cause;
How can he jump into a tussle with just all and sundry?
If you wish to fight with Arjuna, do not remain in this assembly silent.
Tell us—what is your name, where do you come from, what is your caste?' "

Caste! alas caste!—Karna's heart shook with agitation.
Looking up at the Sun, enraged, the hero spoke in anguish;
"Caste caste, you keep repeating, you whose capital is hypocrisy;
What do I know of caste? My caste are these my strong arms.

"You have umbrellas of gold over your heads, yet are black within;
Have you no shame—you who ask about caste in this world?
A charioteer's son am I, but, pray, who was Partha's father?
I dare you to tell me—let not embarrassment make you silent.

"Puffing out your chests you go about talking of caste;
Yet, you live a life of luxury by immoral exploitation;
And when your hearts tremble at the achievements of 'base' castes
you obtain by deceit the sacrifice of a thumb.

"Ask, if you have the courage, my caste, from the might of my arms,
From my forehead resplendent as the sun, from armour and ear-rings;
Read from the radiance you can see shining through me
My history that is inscribed in every pore.

"If Arjuna is indeed a heroic Kshatriya, let him come forward,
And show me also the brilliance of that Kshatriya quality.
Then see, how by dispossessing the prince of his bow and arrows in a trice,
I make known to you my own eminent caste."

Kripacharya then said— "You get angry in vain,
So ordinary a matter, yet unable you are to understand.
If not fighting a prince renders you unsatisfied,
You must for yourself necessarily first acquire some kingdom."

Nonplussed for a moment, Kama's mind was in a whirl.
Unable to bear this injustice, Suyodhana came forward,
Saying—"It is a great sin to insult someone so,
He who truly exudes radiance like the sun.

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"Most difficult it is to trace the origins of rivers and heroes;
What *gothra* could a warrior have other than his bow?
Brave men, on this earth, earn respect by the strength of their penance;
The clamour of 'caste' comes merely from cruel men and cowards.

Who has not witnessed Karna emerging from this crowd,
Effortlessly, shrouding the whole assembly in a sort of awe?
Well may Karna be a charioteer's son, scavenger, or cobbler,
But tarnished in his presence are all the princes here gathered

"Is it proper to besmirch a gem so precious,
A magnificence of humanity, this treasure of the earth?!
If, without a kingdom, heroism can no authority command,
Let the whole world hear this, my open proclamation.

"I place the crown of Angadesh on the forehead of Kama;
A kingdom I offer at the feet of this great hero."
And, as he took off his own crown and put it on Karna's head,
The arena rang out with cries of "Victory to Duryodhana!"

Amazed stood Karna at Suyodhana's extreme generosity,
And burst forth in gratitude to enfold him in his arms.
Duryodhana held him to his heart and said—"Friend, be calm,
Why do you get so overcome by this trifling gesture of mine?

"What special sacrifice have I made by giving you a kingdom?
Arrey! My life will become blessed if you accept me as yours."
Karna melted further—"Really, such affection for me!
Brave friend! From today we have become two bodies, but one life.

The honour you have given me today in this great assembly,
The lift in life for the first time ever that I have received from you,
Grateful I shall be, for how else could I repay you?
May I be favoured, I pray, during the days to come,
For being of service to you."

The happy townsfolk gathered delightedly around Karna,
For, verily, people are known to be ever eager for hero-worship.
Whatever say one—hate, envy, falsehood, respect,
Common people do easily recognise their admired heroes.

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With vermillion and lotus petals did the people adulate Karna,
The thrilled murmuring of the crowd filling the arena in directions four;
And when, with characteristic humility bowed Karna his head in obeisance,
The crowd, overcome, chanted—"Victory to King Angesh!"

"King Angesh!" like an arrow did it pierce the heart;
In impotent rage exploded Bhima, not knowing what else to say.
"Sweeping the horses' stables was his job ere today,
How will a charioteer's son be able to rule a kingdom?"

Duryodhana said— "Bhima, you rant in vain;
You call yourself virtuous, yet your heart is filled with hate.
What matters high lineage, if what you do is fraud?
Shining character determines man's nobility, not heredity, wealth, or grain.

"Truly, indeed, had Karna asked—'who are you'?!
What was the manner of your birth?—open to us that secret, if you remember.
Oblivious to your own sins do you wonder at the strangeness of the world;
Truly it is said that one's eyes cannot perceive one's own forehead."

Betwixt them came Kripacharya, and said– "Chee! What is this?"
Do you have no sense of shame at what remains of your name?
Come,let us go home; look, evening approaches,
You must all be exhausted, you need rest."

The cityfolk left the arena suffused with joy,
Some singing Karna's name, others the praise of Arjuna.
Away from all did Guru Drona take Arjuna, aside,
Exclaiming— "Partha, wherefrom has this new Rahu dropped down, yet again?"

"No equal to your strength, Arjuna, has been born yet in this world;
Focussed on this has my entire attention been till today.
The thumb of Ekalavya I took away, with not a whimper escaping his mouth,
For, to keep your path ever free of thorns is always my wish, son.

"But what I witnessed today has shaken my composure,
As I observe in Karna the signs of supreme heroism.
Should this powerful warrior make progress unhindered,
Arjuna! I fear at some time he could prove to be your nemesis.

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"I wonder what strategy should employ to counter him.
In what way could I dim the brilliance of this fierce comet?
Disciple of mine shall I never accept him, that is certain,
But keep an eye on this formidable rival, you too, my dear young sir."

Blowing conches, the Kauravas escorted Karna from the arena,
Dancing with joy, singing happily, celebrating with gay abandon;
While, like twin mountain peaks of gold, well-built and radiant,
Went Duryodhana and Karna, together, arm in arm.

With great satisfaction did the Sun from the cool western mount
Kiss the limbs of his son with rays of love and tenderness.
Reluctant He was this evening to reach his determinate end,
So, He paused, for a moment, on the horizon, before disappearing from the sky.

But, alas! On the way back to the Queen's abode in the palace,
There was one who trailed behind all, grieving in agitation within.
Like a person whose dreams have been shattered, every gambit lost,
Kunti dragged one leaden foot after another, unable to move.

Translated from Hindi by P.C. Ramakrishna

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Audience of Poetry

Udayan Vajpeyi

[We are living in a time when poets are forced to speak all the time on their own poetry. I am grateful to Mr. Michel Deguy* who has given a poet the chance to speak not on his own poetry but on the time of poetry itself**. Not on the art of his disappearance but the art of disappearance itself.]

1.

I begin with a warning.

To whom is poetry addressed? Without so wanting, this question is differential. It wants us to underline to whom it is not addressed. There was a time when books used to mention at the very beginning as to who should read them and who should not. Was it Flaubert who found a unique way of doing it? He compiled a dictionary of received ideas, a collection of those ideas which had become inert yet were used shamelessly. The subtle suggestion that he was trying to make was that those human beings who can live upon these ready-made ideas need not approach literature because poetry like love does something in the life of its reader that the architecture of the ready-made conceptions where s/he was feeling himself/herself secure gets demonished and s/he finds himself/herself uncovered in the infinity of her/his solitude.

In other words, those who desire a ready-made life with a ready-made ideation, a ready-made history, a programmed past and predetermined

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* Michel Deguy is an important French poet and thinker. He was Director of International College of Philosophy whose earlier Directors were Jacques Derrida and Jean Francois Lyotard.

** I was invited to Paris to dehiver a talk on poetry in the National Library of France.

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future and therefore a mechanised emotional texture should try to avoid reading poetry and should try their best at not loving. They should work out a way of living where they would not encounter either love or poetry as these may bring who knows what kind of distortion in their way of living. Whosoever has decided to live securely in the castle of definite ideas should keep away from poetry and love, otherwise, I warn, the responsibility of the possible demolition of such castles will not lie on poets or beloveds but on themselves.

2.

Ghalib, the great nineteenth century poet in Indo-Persion tradition, wrote:

Hasrat-e-jalwe-e-saqi hai ki har para-e-abra
Seena betabi se milta hai ba teg-e-kuhnsur.

Hindi writer Wagish Shukla in his commentary of Ghalib, first tries to capture the meaning floating on the surface of this couplet (*sher*):

> Every patch of cloud restively hugs the peak of the mountain as each patch has a desire to meet with *saqi*

Then in the light of Persian poetic conventions he delves deep into the couplet where he finds a wondrous world around him :

> In the Persian poetic tradition *saqi* stands for the loved-one, *jalwa* or *jilwa* is the first encounter of bride and bride-groom on the wedding night. *Saqi* stands for God and Prophet too. Meeting with God is possible only after death; therefore the accepted metaphor for death is wedding. That's why the death day of Muslim saints is called *urse* or marriage. *Teg*, of course, is sword. In this light the couplet (sher) reads like this : In the eagerness to meet God, every patch of cloud descends a sword in its breast.

I feel that the sword being referred to here is none else but Ghalib's poetry itself. It is the sword of Ghalib's poetry which descends deep into the heart of the reader eager to meet with the beloved one, the God. The Sanskrit word for the reader is *sahridaya,* the one with a heart. It is an extremely old and well-accepted word, that's why not much attention has

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been paid to its other possible connotations. But I am sensing something of that sort. But we will come to it later. First let us try to connect its classical connotation with the present context. *Sahridaya* (one with a heart) is not only someone who has a heart but is someone who lays it bare to the sword of poetry for it to pierce it through and through.

The convention of considering heart to be the synonym of life is an old one. In fact till very recently the basis for declaring someone dead was cessation of heart-beats. The activity of the heart was not only considered a sign of life but was taken to be almost synonymous with life. *Sahridaya*, the one with a heart, puts this chalice full upto the brim with the liquid of life before poetry. S/he does it for poetry to empty it to the very last drop. This emptying of the chalice is given a name by thirteenth century poetician Mammat : *sadyah parnirvritti*, instant death. To be emptied of life while living, this is what is known by the name of pleasure, that's why yet another meaning of *sadyah parnirvritti* is pleasure, *ananda*. Poetry is for those who have the capacity and longing to be repeatedly emptied of life while living, letting the life flow out of the chalice of the heart, what Ghalib called *hasrat-e-jalwa-e-saqi*, the longing to meet *saqi*. Those who have no such longing, their reading poetry makes no difference because to keep themselves secure, they have sealed the chalice of their heart and have lost the wish to be the witness of the transformation of life into its absence by the extremely non-violent violence of poetry. They escape the practice of death and hence poetry.

3.

A Gambler lays the cards on the table and waits. What is he waiting for? A win or a loss? None of the two, thinks Mister Beever, a character of a short-story of the Polish writer Isaac Singer. The gambler, while gambling, waits for something else, for that which is bigger than the biggest wins and biggest losses: in the unforeseen web of the laid cards, he awaits the revelation of the cosmic intention. Nothing less or more. If he falls short of this, he gets transformed from a true gambler into a cheap trader. This is what Mister Beever thinks.

Was Yudhisthir, the Dharma incarnate of *Mahabharat* in the court of Dhritarashtra, like a true gambler creating a space in between the combines of pawns for the intention of the then-absent Lord Krishna to be revealed? Is it the divine intention of Lord Krishna revealed through the gambling of the knower of Dharma, Yudhisthir, that led him to lose his kingdom, his brothers and allows his wife Draupadi to be dragged in the circle of humiliation so that Lord Krishna could demonstrate his almightiness? Was

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it in the mirror of gambling that Dharma saw the divine intention? Does Dharma have to see the divine intentions in the mirrors of gambling?

Seated in Singer's short-story, Mister Beever is forcing me to say strange things.

4.

O God
No sorrow
measures your sorrow
No seperation
measures seperation from you
I have given up

-A Hill Korwa (tribal) song

In the presence of the *sahridaya*, poetry reveals itself through various configurations,meanings, resonances. Poetry happens to be the locus of the unforeseen coincidences of syllables, words, sentences, rythms. *Sahridaya*, the one with a heart, is someone who is able to get rid of all kinds of preconceptions to be able to become the space for such endless coincidences. Through these coincidences he can give form to his separation from *saqi* and the accompanying pain, the same pain that trickles to us from the Hill Korwa song. It is in the textures of these coincidences that he is able to listen to that *call* which he has once heard rising in himself in the moments of solitude of his separation. That's why one day she called poetry to be a call, a *pukar*. It is in search of this call that the reader passes through various layers of poetry. And it is this *call* which descends like a sword in the heart of the *sahridaya*, the reader. It is this *call*, this cosmic intention which penetrates the *sina-e-bismil*, the heart of the lover like the child's cry, which, the classical theories of Indian music maintain, is the most penetrating of all sounds.

5.

Let us return to the other possible explanation of *sahridaya*.

In ancient cultures important words were explained in two ways, grammatically and hermeneutically.
-Thakur Jaidev Singh, *History of Indian Music*

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It so happens that the word, *hridaya* (heart) has also been explained hermeneutically. Through such exigesis an entirely unique meaning of *hridaya* (heart) comes to the fore. Such an exigesis is to be found in *Chhandogya Upnishad* which shows that *hridaya* (heart) may also be taken to mean the 'abode of the Self.' Heart can also be seen as space where dwells the Self, *Atman*. But Self, *Atman*, is the one which is neitherborn nor dies. Is it not paradoxical that, that which is neither born nor dies, has made the relentlessly pulsating heart its abode? I suggest, for the sake of this talk, let us once more ask this eternal question about this unborn immortal (non) thing : What is it? What is it that is neither born nor dies? In the present context I sense an answer: that which neither takes birth nor in spent, in Death. It is only death which neither is born nor dies.

> The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.
>
> Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*

The darkness that lies before and after existence, in whose endless expanse our existence is but a brief crack of light, is none other but death. That which is present like the reverberations of infinity in the space of the heart is death, known by the name of *Atman* or Self. Therefore *sahridaya*, the one with a heart or the reader, is the someone who is present with his/her death. In other words, poetry is addressed to the one who is with his/her death, who knows that he is living with his death. Poetry repeatedly tears open his heart to bring this hidden death out and this business of tearing apart goes in the name of pleasure, *ananda*.

The longing for this pleasure is so unique and sometimes so intense that no globalized or otherwise world will be able to do anything to it. After all markets can, at the most, destroy life-patterns but how do they destroy this pleasure of dying in living human beings which is the source, ever present, for the various life-patterns?

❑

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Latter-day Meeras: From Nationalist Icon to Subaltern Subject

Akshaya Kumar

With each turn in history, Meerabai[1], the saint poetess of medieval India takes a new *avatar*. While during the colonial period, she becomes one of the preferred icons of the non-violent nationalist imagination, in the postcolonial phase she emerges as an arch symbol of the marginalized and the subaltern. Her verses trudging along the fault-line of devotion and rebellion - an oxymoronic poetics peculiar to *bhakti* poetry as a whole - provide a suitable discursive space for any protest-poetics that is realized within the overarching scope of the sacred and the canonical. Latter-day poets, activists and feminists appropriate her name and legacy to lend native credence to their respective protests in contexts that perennially extend, if not exceed, her original discourse in new situations. As she is resurrected and re-invented, she undergoes strategic cultural transformations that qui e significantly impinge on, and not just mirror the changing contours of culture in our times. This essay restricts itself to the study of latter-day Meeras[2] - the self-proclaimed, the critically designated and the creatively re- imagined ones - to understand the dynamics of after-life of *bhakti*-poetry as a whole.

I

Surprising it may seem but pre-Independence Urdu poetry, during the high tide of progressive movement[3], produced a Muslim male poet by the pen-name of Miraji. Apparently this Miraji had nothing to with the medieval saint-singer Meerabai, because as the story goes, Sana' ullah Dar renamed himself as Miraji after the name of some Mira Sen, a young

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Bengali woman he loved most. But once renamed as Miraji, the poet is inwardly drawn towards the discourse of the medieval Meerabai to the extent that towards the fag end of his life he was "reading and translating the poems of Mirabai, which he intended to publish" (Patel, 241) under the title "Miranjali"[4]. Meera as a name talks back to the person so-named, in ways that triggers off a creative vision which is inevitably implicated in the discourse of the medieval poetess. In her rather extended study of the poet, Geeta Patel, refers to possible creative connection between Miraji and Meerabai: "The problem with Miraji is that because of his name, 'Mira', he is intertextual with and fits the expectations of other poetic lineages, namely the *bhakti* one" (Patel, 245). In the opening sentence of his "Incomplete Self Portrait", Miraji invokes Meerabai thus: "This [Kathiawad, the place of my childhood] is the same place where, many years before, Queen Meerabai had given birth to the magic of her songs. I did not know her then, as I have come to know her [now]" (qtd. in Patel, 248).

Miraji and Meerabai shared somewhat similar destinies to the extent that both were victims of speculative and even vicious historical constructions. If Meerabai was condemned for her unwomanly conduct in repudiating normal domestic course, Miraji was also castigated for adopting a female *takhallus* - a poetic name, and more importantly camouflaging his sexual identity of being a male to his readers for long. Miraji was often described by his contemporaries as "*avara*, as an isolationist, drunk, dissolute, self-centered, pathologically sexual, morally bankrupt man"(Patel, 243); Meerabai too was described as *raand*[5], a debouched and deviant woman by the local Rajputs. Meerabai's unconventional persona, at a subtextual level, only adds complexity to an otherwise equally enigmatic Miraji.

Both the poets—Miraji and Meerabai—preferred the lyrical geet form for its exceptional qualities of oral reach. Miraji performed the singing of songs for the radio; Meerabai sang her songs in *kirtanas* primarily among a band of women devotees. More than mysticism, what brings Miraji close to Meerabai is her lyricism of love. In the poem quoted below, it is not difficult to hear the echoes of the lovelorn Meerabai:

Far off
in the tall indigo jungle
black, blue-black clouds crowed.
In the forest, a black koel called
black shadows on the ground
black, wet eyes
black, blue-black hair.

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Close by
In the center of my heart. Slowly
slowly sighs rose
sorrow poisoned the nectar
sorrow's fierce, fiery glances . . . .

(*Movement*, qtd. in Patel, 328)

The images of "koel", "clouds", "poison", "nectar", "sorrow" etc. are typically Meeraesque as they recur throughout her songs. The following *pada* of Meerabai is evidence enough:

I am dying, swept by the poisonous waves,
The frogs, the peacocks and the rainbirds cry;
The koel also sings,
The clouds gather with greater forces
The flashing lightning frightens me.
Is there in the world any lover of God
Who could remove the pain of my heart?

(*Mirabai*, trans. Nilsson, 32)

The love-in-separation remains the patent motif of both Miraji and Meerabai. Both poems/songs appear to be loose translations of each other.

In another poem by Miraji, the celebration of passion is fulsome and whole-hearted. The all-encompassing love has more than sexual/sensual implications as the lover is seeking fulfillment of a higher kind. In the following poem, the male subject 'I' feminizes itself into a female lover, something so characteristic[6] of *bhakti* and *sufi* poetry as a whole:

I'm sitting
my veil slips off my head
I'm lost in thought,
someone will see my hair
the edges of joy's circle close in
Enough, let nothing new enter the circle of my joy.

("Rare Waves of Passion", qtd. in Patel, 326)

This could as well be the image of the self-possessed forlorn Meerabai, who, in her moments of inner joy does not want anything else to intrude into her private universe of ecstasy. Miraji appropriates Meerabai more as a lover than as a Krishna-*bhakta*. Such a partial or selective appropriation is in keeping with the tradition of pastoral romances in the sufi and Persian narratives of which Miraji is equally a cultural claimant. The passion of love clouds or rather eclipses the passion for devotion, or spiritual enhancement:

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II

In their search for authentic native nationalism, Gandhi and his followers appropriated *bhakti*-poetry[7]. Gujarati *bhakti*-poets like 'Meera and Narsimh Mehta'[8] form an inseparable sub-text of passive, semi-spiritualized struggle against the colonialists. If Gandhi adopts Narsimh Mehta's hymn "*vaisnav jan to tene kahiye, pir prayee jani re . . .*" as his staple prayer-song, he names an English lady - Madeleine Slade, who comes to his *ashram* as his disciple after Meerabai. By re-christening Slade as 'Mira', Gandhi adds another dimension to the discourse of Meerabai.

Gandhi's Mira, as the correspondence between the two suggests, was more of a daughter in awe of a spiritual father. By re-naming Slade as Mira, not only Gandhi superimposes an indigenous frame on the foreign lady, he elevates himself to the position of Krishna[9] as well. As Mira enters Sabarmati Ashram, she becomes "conscious of a small spare figure rising up from a *gaddi* and stepping towards [her]". Immediately lest the relationship is defined otherwise, Mira, in her "Preface" to her compilation of correspondence with Gandhi, entitled *Bapu's Letters to Mira*, pre-empting speculations writes: " . . . , so completely overcome was I with reverence and joy, that I could see and feel nothing but a heavenly light. I fell on my knees at Bapu's feet. He lifted me up and taking me in his arms said, 'You shall be my daughter.' And so has it been from that day."(6).

Throughout their letters to each other, Bapu and Mira struggle to underline their 'sacred' relationship of a daughter and a father. The sensual and the sexual is intellectually controlled, if not suppressed, through metaphysical complements and rejoinders. The letters, particularly of the earliest phase, are replete with extended references pertaining to the controlling of passions, desires (including sexual) and senses. *Brahmacharya* continues to be a recurrent concern. This is how Gandhi explains to Mira his meaning of *brahmacharya*: "Remember my definition of *brahmacharya*. It means not suppression of one or more senses but complete mastery over them all" (246).

In an otherwise conservative nationalist discourse, the bold relationship of a lover and his beloved is thus transmuted into hierarchal relationships such as that of husband and wife or of father and daughter in which, more than love, submission to the male becomes more significant. By invoking Meerabai in the pious nationalist context, Gandhi not only domesticates the 'harlot' Meerabai, he invents an Indian ideal of womanhood from within his own local tradition.

The traditional leitmotif of 'separation' associated with the discourse

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of Meerabai runs through Gandhi's correspondence with his Mira as well. In the absence of Gandhi, which is never very prolonged, the separation-syndrome overtakes Mira. In his letter dated 4-12-25, 'Bapu' underlines the disciplinary potential of separation: "These three day's separation is good discipline"(3). In another letter, Bapu once again philosophizes separation thus: "I know you were feeling the separation. You will get over it because it has got to be got over. The few days' separation is a preparation for the longer that death brings. In fact, the separation is only superficial. Death brings nearer"(4). Negotiating pangs of separation is Gandhian prescription for attaining perfection: "The parting today was sad, because I saw that I pained you. And yet it was inevitable. I want you to be a perfect woman. I want you to shed all angularities"(30). Gandhi insists on separation as penance: "You must try to wean yourself from this longing for physical meeting. I hope the fever is off"(254).

If for Meerabai singing *padas* in honour of 'Girdhar Gopal' is a way of spiritual release, for Gandhi and Mira writing letters to each other, at times without a break of even a day, is a way of consolidating their platonic relationship. For Gandhi, "Writing love letters [to Mira] is a recreation, not a task one would seek an excuse to shirk"(23). Writing letters to Mira embalms Gandhi's disturbed spirits: "This is merely to tell you I can't dismiss you from my mind. Every surgeon has soothing ointment after a severe operation. This is my ointment . . ."(47). Each letter is a part sermon, part prayer, part love-message, and part health-bulletin.

Gandhi's 'Mira' then performs so many cultural functions. She becomes an appropriate embodiment of non-masculine effeminate (yet very much patriarchal) nationalism, championed and practiced by Gandhi. It is through the enabling metaphor of Meera that Gandhi bridges the civilizational differences between the East and the West. With Meera being the locus of both the self and the other within the same tradition, the whole postcolonial polemics of a civilizational Other is done away with.

III

Hindi poetry re-produced its Meera, predictably enough during the high tide of *cchayavad* - a phase ripe enough for re-invoking the obtrusive mystical meanderings of the *bhakti* period. As nationalism turned into a spiritual enterprise of self-recovery and inwardness during the latter phase (post-1920s) of freedom struggle under the influence of Gandhi Tagore, Aurobindo etc., Hindi poetry delved deep into the recesses of

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the soul of the nation. The *cchayavadi* poets sought to go beyond the mere prosaic mapping of the nation done so rigorously by their predecessors from Maithilisharan Gupt to Dinkar; they tended to locate the nation in its abstract traditions, in its poetry and philosophy. While poets like Nirala and Prasad invoked the lofty Indian heritage of *advait, nishkam karma*, and pantheism, Mahadevi Verma preferred to imbibe the mystical mould of *bhakti*.

Just after the publication of her first two collections of poems *Nihar* (1930) and *Rashmi* (1932), Hindi literary critics and fellow poets immediately designated her as 'the modern Mira'. She figured in an anthology of poems written by women-poets entitled *Stri-kavi-kaumudi* (1931) which began with Meera's padas and ended with Mahadevi Verma's poems. This prompted many critics to hail her as the modern descendent of the medieval princess-poet. Moreover the language used by the reviewers of her early poetry was laced with *bhakti*-metaphors. Ramvilas Sharma in his review of *Nihar* in 1934 discovered *bhakti*-streak of *viraha* in her poetry thus:

> Just as the true *bhakta* (devotee) wants *bhakti* more than he does the Lord, and the *karma*-yogi (one who follws the way of detached action) abandons all hope for the fruit of his action and desires only the action itself, so [Mahadevi's] virahini ceases worrying about union and remains absorbed in separation (qtd. Schomer, 241).

It was not simply due to lack of critical language or due to an innate fancy for devotionalism that medieval Meerabai, the saint-poetess, was imposed on to the young Mahadevi. Even later critics[10] invoked Meera as a critical yardstick to measure modern Mahadevi. What led critics to brand Mahadevi as Meera was the dominant streak of *viraha*-induced mysticism (often referred to in Hindi literary history as a phase of *rahasyavad*, as an offshoot of *cchayavad*) in her poetry.

Mahadevi's poem quoted below has a Meera sub-text, for, in terms of its mood (of *viraha*) and imagery it is no different from her padas:

> Unseen, you make my pain
> infinitely sweet;
> unknown, you fill my eyes
> and overflow.
> Painter of golden dreams
> in the abode of sleep -
> who are you in my heart?

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My breaths
constantly follow you out
then return
to kiss your feet.
You who have made me captive
in your victory -
who are you in my heart?

(from *Niraja*, qtd. in Schomer, 301)

The mood of separation only accentuates the sense of mystical union between the lover and the beloved. Both in the poetry of Mahadevi and Meera, the pain, despite differences in degree and type[11] is privileged over joy; rather it is a pre-condition to ultimate bliss.

In another poem, Mahadevi seems to re-sing Meerabai; her idiom and articulation though is relatively more sophisticated and artistic:

I don't know why some say
that I am lost in shadows,
in murky paths and bypaths,
my weeping hid like lurking lightning
With every atom of me, friend, I pour out tears of love
for someone.

(from *Dip-Shika*, trans. Rubin, 179)

Meera also wonders as to why people describe her as a mad woman even though she is engaged in divine pursuits: "I am mad with love/ And no one understands my plight/ Only the wounded/Understand the agonies of the wounded. . . ." (Meerabai, trans. Alston, 62).

Though Mahadevi does not invoke Krishna as her lover-deity, yet her pleadings to the lover 'unknown' are quite similar to those of Meerabai's[12] to her Girdhar Gopal:

Why strike the flesh with anxious trembling,
or blight our smiles with pangs of grief?
Giving us eternal thirst for life to drink,
why have you played so cruel a game?

(from *Sandhya Git*, trans. Rubin, 174)

The saturnine and the ecstatic, the tragic and benevolent combine in one organic whole in the poetry of Mahadevi and Meera both. The complaints are more or less entreaties of a lover. If Miraji takes fancy to Meerabai, the lover; Mahadevi is enamoured of her *bhakti* aspect.

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IV

By the 1970s as nationalist fervour relents and poetic imagination seeks human explanations of events/icons rarefied beyond reason, the myth of Meera is re-staged with a humanist perspective. Such an exercise of humanizing the mythical woman - both the saintly and the sinful - becomes quite a literary trend in mid 1960s. If in Hindi Dharamvir Bharati dares to re-present the sexuality of Radha as Kanupriya[13], in Punjabi, Shiv Kumar Batalvi redeems the condemned Loona of *Kissa Pooran Bhagat* as a vivacious young woman whose physical urges are humanly valid, if not culturally permissible. As against the common perception of Meera being born a saint, Gurcharan Das in his one act play *Mira*[14], endeavours to trace the transformation of the saint-poetess from "a human being into a love-obsessed *bhakti* saint" ("Intro", 15).

As the play opens Mira as a young bride is shown seeking love from her husband Rana, but on the day of the honeymoon, she is asked to bow before goddess Kali—the family goddess of the Ranas. The dreadful Kali frightens Mira, and she refuses to worship her. The disenchantment set in, right in the beginning, multiplies and thus paves way for a plausible transformation of Mira into a saint. Since Rana and Mira do not consummate, the possibility of the birth of a mandatory son becomes impossible. She is accused of being barren, which she contests through a series of metaphors: "A single lamp, no matter how bright, always casts a shadow. Put another one beside it and darkness of both disappears"; "The chariot can't go anywhere on a single wheel"[107].

More than Mira's indifference to her husband's overtures, it is Rana who seems to be indifferent to her. He is obsessed with war and affairs of the state. The following sequence of dialogues between Mira (Actress 1) and her official maid Jhali (Actress 3) reveals the fundamental differences between the husband and the wife:

> Actress 1: Mira is angry with the Rana
> Actress 3: Marriage without quarrel is like food without spice.
> Actress 1: Marriage without love is no food at all.
> Actress 3: He can't play with you forever. The Rana must rule the kingdom.
> Actress1: The Rana must also rule the Rani. He only thinks about the kingdom.
> Actress 3: Mira only thinks of love.
> Actress 1. He only thinks of war.
> Actress 3: He is a conqueror.
> Actress 1: The real conqueror first overcomes himself. (106)

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Gurcharan Das tries to reason out the failure of Mira's marriage in terms of the usual middle class post-marital acrimony between a non-working, feminine housewife and a workaholic husband. The imperatives of modern corporate culture with its known internal family dissentions and marital feuds are thus transposed on to medieval Rajput culture.

In subsequent scenes, Mira's growing isolation is portrayed through a series of dramatic sequences. First she is shown caught between Kali - 'holy goddess of million wars" (111), and Krishna - the eternal lover. As she is forced to make "humble offering of holy blood" before the goddess Kali, she faints. Then, Mira's warm embrace - "unorthodox welcome" - to his cousin Jai almost smacks of incest: "She holds him in a spontaneous embrace. Let me look at you cousin. How handsome you've become!" (115). The palace women - the sisters-in-law, do make an issue of Mira's immodesty:

> Actress 2 [Uda]: You don't go up and embrace a man like that. I almost died of shame. Think of your sacred husband. What must he have felt . . . and in front of everyone . . . if I had been the Rani . . .

Mira's views on love- war, victory-defeat, sorrow-happiness accentuate the rupture. She feels constantly cornered among the war-hungry Rajputs of the palace. What was perceived to be "lover's quarrel' earlier by inmates of the palace, turns into full-scale-dispute. Rana shuts the door on Mira's face.

In moments of utter seclusion Mira turns to Krishna. The playwright seems to suggest that Mira is driven to Krishna in sheer desperation. Krishna is a surrogate of the husband:

> Actress 1: Mira looking very hurt, goes and picks up Krishna. She then sprawls on the floor against the same door. She wants to cry but she can't. She brings up her knees, crosses her arms on them, and puts her face on her arms. (122)

Mira's sexuality - hitherto totally subsumed by her spirituality - is also amply hinted, if not fully elaborated upon. She is very much conscious of her curves:

> Actress 1: Do my hair right. I am feeling hot. Here, take the comb. Feel how smooth my hair is. See how it falls on my shoulders. How it reaches down to my hips.

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> Actress 3: The walls have ears.
> Actress 1: My long black hair on my round white hips.
> . . . (125)

This is indeed a bold depiction of a saint-woman. The playwright retrieves the woman from Mira, the saint. Remarkably enough it is Mira who speaks of her sexuality in the face of espionage. She thus comes out of her submissive feminine self and steps into the possible feminist role.

What is merely hinted as incestuous relationship between Jai and Mira, takes on a concrete shape in the culminating scenes. Jai's relationship with Mira takes on a clear incestuous turn:

> Actor 2 [Jai]: . . . I have missed you very much. Since you left Medta, I have been wasting away in the desert. Let's go away - tonight. We will ride through the forest, and no one will know. If they follow us, we can hide. I'll take care of you . . .keep you warm. (126).

The demand (as against the desire) for a son drives Mira to Jai, but the encounter does not last. Mira's sex-life remains un-attended, un-fulfilled. Krishna remains the only choice:

> Actress 1 [Mira]: Krishna, you are all I have left now. Even Jai is gone. I have nowhere to go. What shall I do? I think I'm going to cry. No, I must be brave. Krishna, I never asked you for anything. Can you do something for me? Can you give me a son? I know it's asking a lot. But what are friends for - especially if they are gods. O please, my dear god . . . (127)

The sexuality of relationship becomes all the more evident, as Mira without fear of backlash admits openly:

> Actress 1: Make him come to me. I remember it was dark. No one saw us. We went to a thicket and I was so shy. O he was flattering. My couch was of leaves but his was my bosom. His lips were like nectar to mine. And I was drunk in his embrace. He held me tight, I could hardly breathe. And we together, I felt sweated and moist, hidden away. I thrilled him so. His half closed eyes became restless and he desired me again. (129)

The active participation of Mira in the sexual act brings about a sudden reversal of roles. Instead of Krishna thrilling her, it is she who thrills

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him. In such a sequence not only Mira stands animated as a young lover, Krishna also is divested of his iconic stillness.

Mira's conversion into Mirabai is complete as the poison that she drinks for her unfaithful conduct as a wife, turns into nectar for her. To reinforce the process of transformation, the playwright shows Rana also losing the battle, and the wife. The entire trajectory of Mirabai's life thus evolves from the quagmire of ordinary life. It is indeed questionable whether all women in the condition of Mira would have transformed into Mirabais. The playwright who undertakes the task of humanizing the divine diva, somehow succumbs to her spiritual aura. The process of transformation of poison into nectar remains un-explained. Is he not in a wishful manner equating suicide with spiritual release? Also is madness a precondition to transcendence?

V

Though Indian English poets claim to be the descendents of medieval *bhakti* poetry, Meerabai remained outside their creative purview for long. Except for a very sparse presence in women's poetry[15], Meerabai does not figure much in the mainstream Indian English poetry. She comes back very late (as late as 2004) in a radically new incarnation in a long poem of Arun Kolatkar entitled "Meera"(26-33). In the poem the spiritualized Meera of the Gandhian era casts off those rarefied nationalist hangovers that curtailed her activist potentials in the hierarchal social realm. She stands transformed into a downright Dalit subaltern who, as a sweeper of the streets, dances like the traditional Meera, "within the narrow compass/ of the wicker bin" with "a broomstick for a lute"(32). Unlike Gandhi's reflective Meera, this subaltern Meera is an untrained spasmodic dancer who breaks into action over "the load of rubbish" in sheer ecstasy of a devoted worker.

There is no lofty Mahatma to beckon her. Her only companion is a soulless "footloose coconut frond" - "a dropout" from "life at the top" in perfect harmony with another social outcaste. The ostracized duo forms a vivacious combination, the frond learns "new tricks/ at her bidding"(26), and she finds it "more lively, more fun". While the male-sweepers prefer the regular, "the fan-tail type" broomsticks, this Meera finds the coconut frond more "effective/ with its longer reach and wider sweep" (27). The frond-Meera camaraderie points towards the possible consolidation of the subaltern.

If in the hands of traditional Meera the lute spells magical notes,

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in the hands of Kolatkar's sweepress Meera, the coconut frond is a perpetual "clown" that performs like " a bear, a green one". The uncouth clownish frond through a subtle ideological reversal thus undoes the classial lute. The frond is a worker that actually works at the ground level" "it lunges and takes sideswipes/ at errant scraps of paper,/ chases the riffraff of dry leaves off the road" (27).

What lends joy to Kolatkar's Meera is not the epiphanic sight of Lord Krishna; rather it is the pile of garbage with all its contents and dis-contents that provides her playful peep into the so-called high-life. As she clears after every fifteen minutes "the modest piles of rubbish/ all along the kerb" made around Jahangir Art Gallery, she learns quite a few lessons of life. First, art has no audience, except for "a few discerning crows and a kitten." Second, the esoteric artistic installations simply ignore the rubbish of life they stand on. And the monotonous regularity with which new exhibitions take off, leaving behind the rubbish of the previous ones, suggests to her "the essential impermanence of all art." The "scraps of paper, prawn shells, onion skins, potato peels, castoff condoms, dead flowers" thus yield to her insights into the tricky issues of permanence and impermanence, of eternity and transience, of beauty and truth.

Instead of the charismatic Girdhar, what enamours Kolatakar's Meera is the garbage trolley - "that rickety looking rattletrap", "that honey cart" which even Euclid, the great mathematician, would have loved it for its perfect yet simple geometrical design. Its jarring noise is all music for the subaltern Meera for what matters more to her is its proximity to the ground:

> It stays close to the ground
> and trundles along
> as it moves like rolling thunder
> on two iron wheels with naked rims
>
> when pushed like a pram
> and has the decency to shudder
> at the noise it makes.

The words like "thunder" and "naked" complement well with the coarse and stark "iron" realities of the subaltern. Only a devotee in trance can offer such an animated description of the instrument of his prayer.

Almost in a mock-heroic style, the ancestry of the trolley is traced as though it is a solemn object of worship. The subaltern poetics, counter-canonical and anti-elitist as it is, entails parodic subversions:

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I won't be surprised
if that tireless fossil belongs
to the very first

generation of trolleys
that came to these shores way back
in 1872 or some such date,

with the noble mission
of cleaning this city.

The adjective "tireless" adds to the activist credo of Kolatkar's Meera who too is a missionary of her kind - instead of cleansing souls, she cleans cities. The trolley and the coconut frond are Meera's instruments of subaltern participation in the tangible and concrete processes of nation-making.

Once on the top of the bin filled with garbage up to the brim, Kolatkar's Meera goes ecstatic. She pays "obeisance to all the cardinal points", and dances like a woman possessed. "Her free arm, raised/ in the air/ is a flamingo in flight" (32). In the last section of the poem, the parodic refrain of the poem attains a higher pitch, as its Meera derives pleasure from the 'dirty' job she performs. The mythical Meera withdraws; Kolatkar's Meera participates. As "she tramples it [the garbage]/ like a vineyard wench/ in a tub of grapes", its essences "licks the soles/ arches of her feet,/ anoints/ callouses,/ and rises/ between her toes"(33). The leftovers of the high-metro - "eggshells and dead flowers,/ dry leaves and melon rinds,/ breadcrumbs and condoms,/ chicken bones and potato peels" (33) - constitute the divine reality for the subaltern Meera. The unseen god, the intangible spirituality, the abstract reflection - constitute mere humbug of the elite.

VI

As creative imagination penetrates beyond the constructions of spiritualism, nationalism or ideology, it unfolds the politics of relationships. The hitherto obscure and camouflaged grammar of the inner domain, of the relations forged in its holy precincts is laid bare without any attempt to reify them beyond human appreciation. Sudhir Kakkar in his semi-fictional endeavour *Mira and the Mahatma* re-constructs the relationship of Mirabehn and Gandhi in terms of bodily metaphors, physical approximations and suppressed desires, with the help of actual correspondence that takes place between

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the two. Not only does the novel bring out subtle differences between the two Meeras - Gandhi's Mirabehn and the mythical Meerabai; it also reflects on the ways the former eclipses the latter in terms of her understanding of love and relationship. The novel written from the perspective of Mirabehn's Hindi teacher Navin offers a peep into Mira-Meera symbiosis.

First and foremost Gandhi's Mira is tutored and trained to be passionless so as to approximate the Hindu ideal of *brahmacharya*. The traditional Meera by way of contrast has no such obligations; she is freer. In one of the entries in her diary, Mirabehn compares her destiny with her prototype and wonders as to why "my [her] God forbids me [her] to dance with ankle bells on my [her] feet and with castanets in my [her] hands" (154). She questions as to why Gandhi re-christened her Mira "if he did not want her passion?"(154). Also, as compared to Meerabai's notional lover-god Krishna, Mirabehn's lover-god is a live 'animate' historical being. The pain of separation of the latter, therefore, is bound to be more intense and acute.

Unlike the traditional Meera, Gandhi's Mira has a deeply divided self. Her public persona and her private persona do not coincide. This is how she sums up her split predicament:

> In his presence and in my letters to him I will be the Mirabehn of Satyagraha Ashram, strong, sensible, loyal to his ideals and his vision. And in my diary, the Mirabai of longing and yearning, dedicated to his person (161).

The distinct political and the personal sides of Mirabehn while lend an additional dimension to the character of traditional Meerabai, also point towards the challenges in living up to the mythical ideals.

In another significant way, Kakkar's fictionally recreated Mirabehn outdoes the original Meerabai. She comes out of her *bhakti* vows and decides to have a relationship with Prithvi, a handsome inmate at Gandhi's ashram. Instead of looking at this development in her persona as a deviance, she describes it as her *poorna swaraj* a process towards her completion. She confesses: "O Prithvi, you do not know what you have been to me. I have strived to serve Bapu and his cause, but have been weak and wanting in all my endeavours, I have been but half a being. You have made me a whole . . ." (239). The mythical Meera does never complete herself and remains throughout a wandering saint.

Mirabehn exceeds Meerabai in the sense that she combines love with faith and activist politics. As Prithvi spurns her offer of love, she writers back: "You ask me to renounce my love, as if it were some

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sort of self-indulgence. You do not realize that *real love*, the love that rises from the depths of the soul, increases the power of service and is as sacred as religion" (256). Further, she adds: "I seek your love and cooperation, not for my personal pleasure, but for greater strength in service for us both." Also, as Mirabehn seeks to step out of her celibate self, her Krishna (i.e., Gandhi) also undergoes a shift in role; from a lover, he turns into "an anxious father of a still unmarried daughter"(246). In Sudhir Kakkar's account, Meera takes precedence over her Krishna. In one of her vulnerable moments with Gandhi, Mirabehn loses all control: "Sobbing helplessly, she clutched his hand between hers. For a fleeting moment, she sensed a separate life in his hand" (147). Gandhi struggles to hold his feelings, innate responses; whereas Mirabehn opens out. Mirabehn wonders "if Bapu envied her a little that she had become free of all restraint in his presence whilst he had to retain his self-control . . . Could Krishna envy Mirabai?(147).

VII

In another text - *Dukh Dariya*, a Punjabi play written by Pakistani playwright Shahid Nadeem 16, the metaphor of Meera is deployed to delineate the pangs of Partition and the turbulent history of the region thereafter. In the play, the beleaguered Kausar, the female Pakistani prisoner, becomes the mother of a girl-child following her rape by the jailer in Jammu. As she desires to go to her home in Azaad Kashmir, her daughter being Indian-born is denied permission to cross the border. As she waits to cross the *dariya* that flows alongside the border, she takes shelter at *dera* Meera Mai near the border at Amritsar during the night.

To her surprise, Kausar finds echoes of her predicament in Meera Mai's history. In the dark days of Partition, Meera Mai could not make it to "this [Indian] side of the border". She consequently marries a Pakistani and conceives a daughter. Following the exchange of women from either side of border, she is sent back to India. This results in what she terms as "her second partition". Her Indian parents also refuse to accept her; being a wife of a Pakistani Muslim she, they allege, is no longer pure. She expresses her anguish thus: "The others separated me from my daughter, my own ones, separated me from myself". She is forced to live on the margins near the defunct *mazaar* of a peer Hazrat Gayab Ali Shah and converts the entire place into a *dera*. She takes on the role of a sufi-saint who gives tabeez to the newly-born. The playwright Nadeem

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in this kind of crossover generates a *sufi* Meera. As one of the constables in the play says: "You are a *dervesh* and you are a woman too".

Kausar's character bears intertextuality with that of the mythical Meerabai. Her in-laws condemn her for being infertile. She is driven to jump into the river, which finally takes her to Indian shores. She too breaks into frenzy in the *darbar*[17] of Meera Mai. She defies social conventions as she carries in her womb the child of her rapist. Her husband and her in-laws are proven wrong by her accidental pregnancy. Her daughter born out of wedlock is thus her Krishna, her idol, that she would never forsake her even if it entails total annihilation of the self. Both Meerabai and Kausar celebrate the illegitimacy of their relationship with same degree of defiance.

The playwright brings in yet another intertext into the play to consolidate his theme of Partition. The story of Sita parallels the stories of both Meera Mai and Kausar. Sita too was asked to live in exile. In the play, she is shown to live around the same area in which the present day *dera* Meera Mai is. Luv and Kush, the twin-sons of Sita, as the legend goes, created two Pakistani cities of Lahore and Kasur, while Sita was forced to roam around in the jungles near Amritsar. Mukhtar Nath, who happens to be the keeper of the *dera*, makes a cryptic observation thus: "Sita's ashram is this side, her sons' kingdom on the other." All the three female protagonists of the play thus undergo separation from their wards on account of the arbitrary boundaries drawn by political leaders. The myth of Sita flows into the story of Meera Mai and Kausar forming a continuum of experience.

In the Pakistani play, Meera's scope thus stands enlarged in three unique respects. One, it is lifted beyond its regional landscape of Rajasthan and Gujarat and is transplanted onto partitioned Punjab, a territory where otherwise powerful *sufi* heroines like Heer, Sohni, Sundrara etc. have hardly ever allowed any other female lover/devotee to have much room in the Punjabi literary imagination[18]. In the play, instead of *padas* of Meera, *sufi* songs of Khusrau and Bulleh Shah, poems of Amrita Pritam and Shiv Kumar Batalvi provide the love-laced *bhakti*-backdrop. Meera's conversion into a Punjabi Heer or Sohni thus generates a mixed yet consolidated persona which is not necessarily hybridized.

Two, the metaphor of Meera stands for 'the pain in separation' in general; it could be separation between the lover and beloved, or the separation between the mother and her daughter or the separation forced on families displaced during Partition. Mukhtar Nath, the male-jogi in the play introduces her Meera Mai as the very personification of "bicchore ka dookh" - the pain of separation. And three, it becomes the locus

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of ancient as well as modern history of the region in the sense that Meera becomes a metaphorical link between the abandoned Sita on the one hand and equally confused Kausar on the other. Nadeem's Meera is not simply a witness to multiple partitions; she herself is a victim of it as she is tossed around from this side of the border to the other side of it.

VIII

Thus, Meerabai, along with her poetic discourse continues to enjoy a rich and varied post-life. While her own biographical journey still invites keen historical scrutiny, the biography of the icon of Meera—right from the nationalist period to present-day post-nationalist subaltern politics—appears to be more tangible than the historical persona. The successive writers and practitioners of different literary genres have deployed Meera as a metaphor of protest in all kinds of postcolonial situations right from Partition to subaltern poetics of participation from below. Poetry and the poetess not only just survive in the so-called non-poetical times, rather they invade other genres and time-zones as capable tropes of intertextual re-writing.

Notes

1. Different latter-day writers have spelt Meera in a number of ways. In order to maintain distinction between the original and her latter-day incarnations, in the text of this essay, Meera or Meerabai stand for the medieval *bhakti*-poetess; all other spellings such as Mira, Miraji, Mirabehn, Meera Mai etc. are author-specific and therefore placed in comparative frame vis-à-vis the original Meera.
2. The present attempt excludes 'filmy' as well as 'translated' Meeras, for both types require distinct studies beyond the scope of the present limited endeavour of mapping Meeras in the domain of creative literature only.
3. Miraji appeared on the literary scene in 1930s when Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) was gaining speed. Writers like Manto, Faiz, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sajjad Zahir, Munshi Prem Chand etc. wrote under Marxist influence. Miraji had a rather troublesome and uneasy association with the progressives. Neither did he nor the PWAs own each other fully.
4. This is how Miraji designed his frontispiece of his book on translated Meera songs:

   Miranjali
   Mira's Offerings

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Mira ke git
Mira's Songs

Hindi gujarati marwari
Hindi Gujarati Marwari

murattabah
arranged by

Miraji

(qtd in Patel, 241-42)

5. "... in Rajasthan her name was often used as a term of abuse for promiscuous women. By abandoning her husband, she had defied male prerogative and upset Rajput honour. The Rajputs in turn had retaliated and suppressed her name not only in written records but deep within society's memory as well. Her devotional songs so popular all over the country, were not sung in Rajasthan until recently" - Gurcharan Das, ("Intro."13).
6. Kabir prefers to describe himself as Ram ki bahuriya ("wife of Rama"). In the *sufi* poetry of Bulle Shah for instance, the saint poet projects himself as "madwomen in love with the divine" (mein kamali yaar di).
7. "It was Mahatma Gandhi who resuscitated her [Meera] in the twentieth century when he entered the freedom movement in 1915. Through his writings, political speeches and his prayer meetings Mira entered the national consciousness. Gandhi had wisely tapped a reservoir of goodwill for *bhakti* in the Indian psyche and secured for Mira a wide popular base amongst the Indian middle and lower classes and a place in the nationalist political culture. Following his example, Tagore named his daughter after Mira. So did many pothers." - Gurcharan Das, ("Intro", 13-14).
8. Gandhi is careful enough to avoid radical bhakti-poets like Kabir and Ravidas in favour of the not-so-radical Meera or Narsimh Mehta.
9. In many latter-day texts Gandhi is often projected as a modern-day Krishna. In Dinkar's Rashmirathi or Bharati's Andha Yug, Krishna is modelled after Gandhi. In his Meaning of India, Raja Rao, Gandhi is Krishna the master charioteer who takes Nehru as Arjuna through the ordeals of *Mahabharata*.
10. Many latter-day Hindi critics also discovered in Mahadevi a potential Meera. Nanddulare Vajpayee not only placed Mahadevi in the lineage of Meera, but also believed that she would carry forward the unfinished poetic mission of the medieval mystic in modern times. This is what Vajpayee observes: "I have to say that the basis of poetry in both Meera and Mahadevi, in many parts, is same, but both are creations of two epochs. Meera's poetry offers an example of innate overflow of emotions. . . We do not get the finesse of poetic art ... Mahadevi's poetry has all the sophistication of the poetic art. ..." ("Yama ka Darshnik Adhar", Gurtu, 222-223.)]
11. "Mahadevi seems to adopt pain, for Meera pain is essential. Meera is helpless in her pain, and she is eager to get over it. She is thirsty and therefore there is a craving for water. Mahadevi seems to desire thirst only; she has not known thirstiness." - Jainendra Kumar ("Sushri Mahadevi Varma", Gurtu, 5)

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12. The following song of Meerabai provides a perfect sub-text to Mahadevi's entreaties:

Look how he wounds me
again
He vowed to come, and the yard
is empty

food flung away
like my senses

- tell me
where to find them

Why must you
shame what you say?
You've wisped
yourself away, lifter
of the mountain

left me here
to splinter

(*Meera*, trans. Shama Futehally, 57)

13. The sexual assertion of Radha is amply expressed in the following lines taken from Bharati's Kanupriya written in early 1960s:

and this my embrace is cruel
and blind, and frenzied, and my arms
tighten across your shoulders, arms and lips
like the coil of a nagavadhu (female-snake)
whose radiant toothline of blue signs have
just emerged on your body . . . (51)

14. The play was first performed at the La Mama Theatre, New York on 20.05.1970. It was directed by Martin Brenzell, with music by David Walker. The play has since been performed in Mexico City (1971), Bombay (1972), New Delhi (1973 & 1998), Ahmedabad (1973), Madras (1985) etc.
15. Among contemporary woman writers, Draupadi continues to be the chosen female protagonist. From Mahasveta Devi (Bangla) to Pratibha Ray (Oriya), to Ajeet Kaur (Punjabi), a host of women writers across languages has re-written Draupadi as their central figure in their fictional forays. Meera's presence, in comparision to Draupadi, is negligible. Among modern women writers only Rukmini Bhaya Nair seems to take some notice of her in the form a poem entitled "Meera" (*Ayodhaya Cantos*, Pengun).
16. The play is a production of Ajoka Theatre Group, Lahore, Pakistan. It was staged at Tagore Theatre, Chandigarh, on 07.10.2006 under the direction of

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Pakistani woman director Madeeha Gauhar. It had cast from both sides of the border.

17. Interestingly enough Meera Mai in the play is at times invoked through metaphors and images that are often associated with the aggressive mainstream Hindu goddess Durga. Repeatedly dera of Meera Mai is described as "*darbar of jagat Maiyya, of jotan wali Ma*" - these are typical Durga invocations.

18. Meera is almost absent in contemporary Punjabi literature. The influence of local sufi-archetypes is so overwhelming that archetypes from other local cultures do not really register as much in the creative Punjabi unconscious. Even Punjabi woman writers, including Amrita Pritam, despite their *bhakti* leanings, prefer to express through sufi-heroines. Except for a poem or two, that too either written from abroad (for instance Ajmer Rode's "Meeran de Hatthan Wich", Leela, 334) or from other non-Punjabi areas, Meera is apparently no match to a *sufi* Heer or a Sohni.

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My Life in My Words, by Rabindranath Tagore, selected and edited with an introduction by Uma Das Gupta, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, Pp. 395+xx, Rs. 495.

In an apocryphal story emanating from the BBC a researcher being interviewed, asked what she is working on, replies solemnly that she is writing the autobiography of a famous man. She remains unaware that she has made a slip. "She meant *biography*, of course. Luckily the interview was being recorded – it wasn't going out live – so we were able to edit it out."

In the book I am discussing writing the autobiography of someone else is not an inadvertent error, but an integral part of the overall plan. Uma Das Gupta was invited by Penguin Books "to do an 'autobiography' of Rabindranath Tagore—a Rabindranath in his own words": her editor's idea was for her "to 'write' his autobiography as it were." The outcome is this book in which extracts from Tagore are presented in two main parts, 'My Life' and 'My Thoughts', with smaller chapters in each part. The twenty-five chapters in the first part are each prefaced by a page of introductory comments from the editor, while the seven chapters in the second part stand on their own.

The book thus embodies the paradox that though it purports to be Tagore's autobiography, the selection and arrangement of material are necessarily the editor's, who calls her work "my presentation" Would it not have been fairer to name the book "his life in his words" put together by an editor? After all, the choice and the ordering of material are vital strategies in any narration, parts of the total statement, and we can be sure that Tagore's decisions would have been different. For instance, would he have included extracts from his letters to his wife? I doubt it. He was painfully reticent about his private life, so much so that he even omitted Mrinalini Devi's name from the collection *Smaran*, though the poems are evidently dedicated to her memory. I am glad that extracts from his letters to her have been included in this book, but the decision

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was really a biographer's, not related to any autobiographical impulse of Tagore's that we might imagine.

The strain of maintaining the autobiographical framework is evident. While some chapters have titles like 'My Father and Mother', 'My Education', or 'Gandhiji and I', other titles like 'An Uneasy though Versatile Period, 1927-31' or 'More Travel, More Poetry, More Drama' show the editor slipping into the biographical mode.

To take another instance, would Tagore have begun his narrative with a sketch of the historical background of his family in the nineteenth century, as Das Gupta has done? Again, I doubt it. His instinct was an artist's, which he always put in opposition to a historian's approach. His own memoirs written at different stages of his life indicate his outlook quite clearly. *Jibansmriti* begins with the image of an unknown artist painting pictures on the canvas of memory, insisting that the job of this mysterious artist is to paint pictures, not to write history. *Chhelebela* begins with a poem, followed by a vivid evocation of the old Calcutta of his boyhood days. *Atmaparichay* begins with a complete disavowal of any autobiographical talents in himself and the frank statement that in writing an account of his life he will omit the part that is called an account and try to capture how his life has expressed itself through his poetry, how that process looks to him. That a poet's authentic spiritual autobiography is in his poetry is the insistent message of this last work, a text soaked in poetry, written in a poetic style, with ample quotations from his own poetry and passages of poetic prose from his letters.

Das Gupta must be aware of all this, as she draws on all three works for her material, but curiously enough, she allocates only marginal space to the testament of poetry, giving as her reason her "personal reluctance to link his poetry to anything specific in his life," and adding: "Given his views about writing poetry, I think he would have approved of my restraint in deducing all manner of hidden meaning in his poetry." But poems are capable of telling their own stories, without us having to deduce hidden meanings. She does indeed present a few—"contextually, where I found it meaningful to my presentation, or if the context was directly taken from particular moments of his life," explaining "There is that kind of hard data for a few of his poems." The phrase "hard data" betrays her approach, in which the fine filaments of connection between a poet's life and his poetry are brushed aside. Das Gupta's strange decision to use only the old translations tends to diminish rather than enhance Tagore's status as a poet. Barring a handful, most of the examples reproduced convey no idea of the beauty of the originals, and some, sadly, are outright travesties.

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Tagore's life as a writer of fiction and drama or as a composer of songs is hardly covered. Das Gupta's real forte is in presenting Tagore as a significant sociopolitical activist and a thinker of his time, and in that respect the book presents a substantial amount of interesting material which will be a good read to those who know little about these aspects of Tagore's life and personality. Perusing such chapters, the reader cannot fail to be impressed by the acumen of the man's thinking, to notice how relevant he still is today, and to realize that he was no poseur. The longer extracts offered in these areas allow us to grasp how he built his arguments and carried them forward, whereas many of the extracts covering the more personal aspects of his life are so short that they produce a 'cut-and-paste' effect. Some of the shortest, no more than a sentence or two, do not build up to a steady image. I often had the sensation that I was in a train and landscapes were whizzing past me. The cinematic forwards and backwards movements in time may confuse some readers. For instance, after taking her subject to England and bringing him back (1878-79), Das Gupta returns him to his early childhood schooling.

Wherever possible, Das Gupta has used material written by Tagore originally in English or translated in his lifetime. I feel a twinge of discomfort at the way Tagore's English texts are privileged in the Introduction. True, Tagore "remarkably turned himself into a bilingual writer in his advanced years," but the pieces written originally in English tended to be his public lectures given abroad, open letters to dignitaries, and letters to his foreign friends. The trouble with scholars privileging such texts, or those he himself translated, is that given the global dominance of English, it feeds a kind of parallel discourse where Tagore students work exclusively from English sources, never try to learn Bengali, and come to believe that what Tagore wrote in Bengali is not all that important. Sadly, such a school of thought already exists in the West.

Using the old prose translations has its pitfalls too. The texts of *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days*, translated by Surendranath Tagore and Marjorie Sykes respectively, while good enough reads, have their fair share of problematic areas, and should not be used now without amendments. It is extremely confusing to read, in an extract from the former, that after returning from his "second voyage to England" Tagore went to stay with Jyotirindranath and Kadambari at Chandernagore. The visit to Chandernagore happened not after his "second voyage to England" (which happened in 1890, when Kadambari was dead), but in 1881 after an aborted attempt to go to England a second time. Marjorie Sykes converts Abdul the boatman's pointed beard into his "pointed head" and *pankher-kaj-kora ghar* (room with lime-wash decorations on cement

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floor or walls) into an "inlaid parquet floor" (which is made of wood-blocks laid in a pattern). Surely such details do matter from a historical perspective?

But the biggest problems in this book are in the extracts translated by Das Gupta herself. Whilst most of us agree that there has to be a degree of creative intervention in the translation of poetry, the rendering of prose demands greater loyalty to the text. Das Gupta offers no explanations of her methodology of translation, but takes innumerable liberties, some of which have left me gasping. She writes idiomatically enough, and usually gives us the gist, but some of her errors of comprehension, coming from a native speaker of Bengali, have left me puzzled: *reshomer peshwaj* (silken dancing-dress) becomes "a woollen top"; *makhmal* (velvet) becomes "muslin"; *shasyakshetra* (fields of crops) becomes "mustard fields". In 1890 *gaarhi* is surely a carriage, not a "car", and in 1901/2 Tagore would not "switch off' any lamp on his house-boat. Sailing to Europe across the Mediterranean, Tagore sees Greece correctly on his right-hand side, but in Das Gupta's translation Greece falls strangely to his left! Her style is habitually paraphrastic, ignoring twists and turns, chopping, changing, cutting out phrases, clauses, whole sentences, even paragraph after paragraph without using omission marks. (Omitting omission marks is something she often does in extracting passages from other people's translations also.) Often where Tagore's style is feisty, eloquent, or rhapsodic, she is matter-of-fact; his rhetoric and prose rhythms are frequently abandoned, and his baroque ornamentations and arabesques clipped. Where Tagore writes, *Aami tomar kajei tripuray ashiyachhi* ("It is on *your* errand that I have come to Tripura"), she writes, simply, "I am in Tripura." She also omits details which could possibly have a sexual innuendo. Where the original mentions a girl in a sari and *kanchuli* (breast-cloth), the breast-cloth vanishes in the translation! When Tagore sends kisses to his children *and* to his wife, the kisses to his wife are discreetly cut out! All the little cross signs for kisses (xxx) which Tagore sends lovingly to his wife fall into the same editorial black hole. This kind of censorship is unusual in the 21st century, and effectively re-writes Tagore.

There are other problematic areas in the critical apparatus. I wish Das Gupta had included references to the *Rabindra-Rachanabali* editions of texts instead of referring us to single-volume editions only, because the Collected Works edition is how most of us will access the texts. I cannot understand why *Chithipatra* is written as *Chitthipatra* throughout the book; a diacritical mark could have indicated the correct consonant, but *Chitthipatra* is plain wrong. Indeed, I cannot understand why a Delhi printer cannot supply Sanskrit diacritics. Several of the Sanskrit quotations

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have errors, and some other misprints/mistakes ("Kanchenjhunga", "dark and dinghy", "Guiseppe Tucci", "Speakers Gallery", "Strangers Gallery", "Reports Gallery") also jar on us. The ship on which Tagore sailed to Aden in 1890, "Shyam" in the Bengali text, needs to be written as SS *Siam* in English, not as "SS Shyam". The ship on which Tagore sailed out of Argentina in 1925 is the *Giulio Cesare*, not "Giuleo Cesaro"; Tagore misspelt it once and I pointed it out in my edition of the Tagore-Ocampo correspondence. The villa in which Ocampo accommodated Tagore was *not* her own, but rented from a relative. He wrote *two* poems on the Argentine chair, not just one. The paragraph written to Ocampo on 17 January 1925 is *not* a separate letter, but just a postscript to the letter of 13 January 1925 which got torn off the main letter.

In 1930 Tagore *did not* give the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford first and *then* exhibit his pictures in Paris. The Paris exhibition happened first and from Paris he went to England to give the lectures. When in 1932 he went to Persia by air, it was *not* the first time he was on an aeroplane; the very first page of the travel journal *Parasye* mentions that he had travelled from London to Paris on an aeroplane. Perhaps after ploughing through a large amount of material, Das Gupta became fatigued; it is a pity that the publisher did not provide additional editorial assistance to check such things.

Ketaki Kushari Dyson

Last Bus to Vasco: Poems from Goa, by Brian Mendonca, published by Brian Mendonca, 2006, Pp80, Rs.150

At first glance *Last Bus to Vasco* is the journey by bus, train with ships and air travel as backdrop, and also a journey to places and the past, coming to a halt with a bon voyage kind of feeling....

Under the veneer of a tugging bond between his hometown, its people, and its landscape peeps the perennial question:

'Where is my destiny?'

He is told or he tells himself:

'Goa, Brian Goa, I have no doubt on that issue.'

In a deep awareness, the last lines of the collection give to Goa its place:

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Place of origin, final destination.
White meets blue in the liquid sky

Brian Mendonca is well-versed in the heritage of Goa, having first-hand knowledge of the place he writes about marked by a zest for life, which comes right from his first rum days with madcap Zeno, to the gourmet's delight of Goan dishes that can put a food magazine to shame.

Last Bus to Vasco:Poems from Goa by Brian Mendonca is a collection of 50 poems written in Goa, on Goa and while travelling to and from Goa. It is his first book of poems, a hardbound book, a quality production. The front jacket cover flaunts a suggestive flap illustration of a bus, the back jacket holds a CD from which the poet reads out the poems in his own rich voice. The glossary has all the details, dates and cites the occasion for writing the poems. And the interview reveals how he has done something for Goa, Indian poetry and also proved himself worthy of the chance to live.

Buses and trains also appear to be characters with roles to play, and owing to their proximity with Mendonca, assume a familiarity so that besides the whistle we also hear of a 7316 in the same breath as a Haripriya, and at Londa station we see humans doing the usual thing with animals—thus raising issues of public cleanliness and when he says in "Slippers in the Sand" 'All it asks for is one more chance' this is Brian's plea for the women of the night. We see the humanity seeping in. Not only does he romanticize the quaintness of his hometown, he paints its inner geography so that a non-visitor feels pulled.

I have yet to come across a book of poems that uses so many languages with such felicity. He hops from native to foreign languages (someone has made a count of seven) as if he is hopping from one platform to another.

He also culls from different religions, from Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, so that we see the spires rising, arches curving as the Matrimandir of the faithful.

His primary concern is for the landscape, and hence this frenzy against the hackers of trees. We feel the pain emanating from the gashes, by madmen.

Until
What was, cease to be.

'The world is too much with us.' He quotes the bard and says:

You exact too high a price,
To fashion yourself shelters through a ruthless device.

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In a keen comment on the changing Goan landscape he notes in "Homecoming" that the old Goan houses are under siege by 'developers.' Houses that squatted earlier, now rise higher to reach the sky.

The women in his poems come like the lanterned night:

> Where are you now?
> She asks softly
> And I, the past seiging my senses
> Stagger into the darkness
> to be with her.
> Alone.

Sonya is a:

> dawn girl, gazer of sunsets,
> sand in your shoes, moonlight in your face.
> *Aqui o mar acaba e a terra principia.*

Maria is equated with Ophelia, Lucia and Grace and her madness is a sad sweet song. But underneath all this we have the mellow sound of a woman singing to him:

> —if you read my mind it is just a chord
> on a lonely guitar
> a sheaf of memories
> home.

In "May Queen":

> Mum tells her beads for the rosary
> As the koel cries on the heels of the rain.

In "Room No 9" he writes:

> I hear you breathing, mum
> your nearness embraces me.

I quote Mendonca: "Ravished with the beauty of Goa, its culture and its ways, I yet need to stay in Delhi professionally.

"As a sometimes writer living the greater part of life in Delhi what preoccupied me most during my trip to Goa was—'Am I relevant to Goa? Do my writings strike a chord with readers in Goa? Am I making a meaningful contribution to Goa—however small?'"

The melding of time and space for the writer-traveller (and perhaps

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fugitive) reaches through in his cameos which record the passage of time like in "Good Friday in Cuncolim":

A window from a hospital room
It is usually dull on Good Friday
Specially between 12 and 3
Says my father.

and

Tiresias you see all things
Across the realms of the past, you endure
Talent and money
What are they without time?

The book is a stationary travelogue that moves more through time than space, looping and whorling in circles and parabolas of past and present.

I am won over by his language—such brevity in a travelogue, music in the lyrics, jingling of whistles and horns, clever use of images, postcard memories of Rodin on a rock, remain long after the book is put down. I am sure this is one more land stone crossed in the ascent of Indian English Poetry.

While classifying Brian as a travel poet would oversimplify his work which has social consciousness and concern, his humour and satire, one has to say that his poetry is unique, breath-taking and ultimately refreshing, with the poet constantly talking to us, even if sometimes it is only meant for himself.

Sivakami Velliangiri

Shakespeare without English: The Reception of Shakespeare in Non-anglophone Countries, Ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Chee Seng Lim, Delhi, 2006, Dorling Kindersley.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) remains even today, almost four hundred years after his death, one of the most imposing figures of world literature. Not only does he occupy an iconic position in the history of English

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literature, but he also remains one of the few authors whose works have been so extensively reworked and rewritten in so many different languages almost all over the world.

What does Shakespeare mean today to the non-English-speaking world? That was the question a seminar on 'Shakespeare in non-anglophone Countries', organized as part of the Seventh World Shakespeare Congress in Valencia, Spain, in April 2001, sought to answer. *Shakespeare without English* emerges from that seminar and carries eleven essays that were presented at the seminar. The essays look at various aspects related to the status and study of Shakespeare in India, China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Romania, Germany, Spain and Brazil.

The location of Shakespeare has always been very complex and ambiguous, particularly for erstwhile colonies of England. The academic study of Shakespeare in most countries under British rule was part of a larger project of imposing European stereotypes regarding language, culture and civilization; it was part and parcel of the colonial project, as the editors write in the introduction. Yet the original Shakespearean text figures as a point of departure for radical, highly selective reworkings; the play is dismantled and reconstituted in a *simulacrum* act, combining chosen Shakespearean elements with other elements drawn from the host culture. These radical re-sitings, adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare have been consistently political and topical in nature; the manner in which Shakespeare has been received and reworked has been shaped by the needs and realities of receiving cultures. Thus, in China, European drama, of which Shakespeare was seen to be the epitome, was welcomed as a recipe for reinvigorating Chinese national literature. The first Chinese professional Shakespeare production, Shen Lin writes in his essay, "Shakespeare: 'Theirs' and 'Ours'," was based on *The Merchant of Venice* tale and was first staged very successfully in 1913. Part of the reason for its success lay in its 'daring topical lampooning of the off-stage abuse of power and perversion of justice.' Again, a Chinese adaptation of *Macbeth*, staged the same year, reworked the Shakespearean text into a play of protest aimed against the Chinese leader of state, who was widely seen as having surrendered to the arm-twisting of the Japanese.

The essays in this collection focus largely on stage appropriations of Shakespeare. They investigate the phenomenon of literary 'reception' by highlighting the assimilation of the Shakespearean play into indigenous art forms. *Shakespeare without English* underscores the dynamics of importing a foreign cultural commodity that has assumed global dimensions into an indigenous context.

The volume starts off with an 'Introduction' that sums up some of the major theoretical and historical questions relating to the reception

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of Shakespeare in non-anglophone contexts and highlights the open-endedness of Shakespearean plays as vehicles of political statement—'Shakespeare lays out innumerable images and designs for other times and nations to relate to and draw upon. Such a Shakespeare is indeed without English. He has surrendered his language to ensure a deeper communion with the world.' The introduction also highlights the contradiction implicit in the fact that while Shakespeare has been traditionally associated with colonialism, there seems to be little to distinguish how Shakespeare has been resited in the East and the West; comparable appropriations are seen in India, Romania, Spain and Germany, the editors contend.

Shen Lin echoes the stance of the "Introduction" on the element of agency that is implicit in any reception activity and that is ironically forgotten all too often. He thus attributes Shakespeare's success at least partially to the translator and the relevant non-anglophone literary tradition that is the destination point of the reception circuit. He is, at the same time, not averse to acknowledging the ideological potential of the Shakespearean text itself. Thus he writes that while it is true that the rise of Shakespeare to the status of a world cultural hero was linked with British colonialism and with the global propagation of English literature that it implied, yet the fact that he has been heavily re-sited by writers even in Europe itself—Dryden, Edward Bond, Voltaire, oethe, Schlegel, Lessing, Mme de Stael, Hugo, Stendhal, Turgenev—indicates that 'Shakespeare's text is so heavily encrusted with various ideological readings that it has become the depository of received opinion and conventional wisdom.' 'Dramatists and directors...have (thus) deliberately stood familiar Shakespeare plays on their heads to drive home their own ideological points.' Lin also highlights the contradiction inherent in the fact that while the acute political incorrectness of the original texts has sometimes given rise to adaptations that seemingly engage in Bard-bashing, such adaptations have ended up constituting the most effective way of ensuring Shakespeare's usefulness as a site for ideological contest in non-anglophone countries.

The Chinese reception of Shakespeare manifests itself in a conflict between the demand for a historically accurate Shakespeare and the claims of a new socially responsible drama. While the initial reception of Shakespeare was geared towards topicality, the 1930s saw the emergence of the demand for an 'authentic' Shakespeare, Shen Lin writes. Again, state policies resulted in a virtual disappearance of Shakespeare from the Chinese stage from the 1960s onwards, only to see him return even more strongly in 1984 with the first Chinese Shakespeare Festival.

This volume also carries a fascinating essay called "*Shamlet:* Shakespeare as a Palimpsest" by Alexander CY Huang. Huang focuses on *Shamuleite:*

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yige fuchou xiju (*Shamlet: A Revenge Comedy*), an avante-garde ten-act comedy written and directed by Lee Kuo-Hsiu and first performed in Taipei in 1992. The play ends up defamiliaring the original Shakespearean play it is based on and ends up challenging the global hegemony of Shakespeare, the essayist contends. Not only does the title itself reveal the affiliation of the play with the genre of satire and identify its Shakespearean genology, but it also transforms Shakespearean high tragedy into low comedy and carries associations of 'sham' and 'shame'. *Shamlet* uses the play-within-a-play structure and frames the story of *Hamlet* within the story of a very mediocre theatre company rehearsing and staging *Hamlet* on a tour of Taiwan. Huang shows how the play goes out of its way to undermine the theatrical illusion that naturalist theatre is expected to sustain.

Younglim Han's "Korean Shakespeare: The Anxiety of Being Invisible" highlights the need for an awareness of how receptions of Shakespeare are shaped by very different historical contexts and the dangers of scouting for any universal pattern therein. He substantiates his point by saying:

> ...in Japan, the reception and institutionalization of Shakespeare was part of an imperial edict on righteousness and moral superiority, whereas in Korea the use of Shakespeare was, rather, to foster an ethos that would resist the threat of Japanese occupation.

Kumiko Hilderdink-Sakamoto's essay in this collection studies the 'Japanese Shakespeare'. The essayist starts off by looking at the success of Yukio Ninagawa's version of *Macbeth* in the UK. Ninagawa's *Macbeth*, the essayist contends, marks a return to the first phase of Shakespeare reception in Japan; it combines Japanese traditions with elements transferred to it from outside. While the first Shakespeare production in Japan was a grandiloquent adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* performed by a group of Kabuki actors in 1885, Shakespeare soon ended up being exploited by amateur practitioners to provide an alternative to the canonical Kabuki plays. Shakespeare thus helped the formation of a rival tradition in the formative years of modern Japanese theatre, Hilderdink-Sakamoto writes.

Shormishtha Panja's "Not Black and White but Shades of Grey: Shakespeare in India" and Harish Trivedi's "The Anglophone Shakespeare: The Non-anglophone Shakespeare" are the two Indian contributions to this volume. Panja focuses on the United Players' Guild's production of *Othello—A Study in Black and White*, staged in New Delhi in 1999-2000. Directed by Royston Abel, the play 'embedded *Othello* in a script that dealt with UPG's rehearsing and staging of Shakespeare's play.' The production, she finds, figures as a site for conflicting anxieties about race,

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class and language. Panja also traces a brief history of the reception of Shakespeare in Bengal and in Delhi and reads the Royston Abel adaptation in the context of other Shakespeare productions, notably those by Ebrahim Alkazi, BV Karanth and Habib Tanvir. Trivedi's essay, on the other hand, comes right at the end of the volume and may be read as contesting some of the assumptions behind the very name of the seminar out of which this book emerged. It sounds a cautionary note and warns against an uncritical acceptance of any categorical division between the terms 'anglophone' and 'non-anglophone'. The non-anglophone Shakespeare is not one but many, implies Trivedi when he writes: 'The fact that a study of Shakespeare was imposed on India as part of the colonizing agenda of the British, also served to introduce complexities in the Indian reception of Shakespeare quite absent from other non-anglophone countries where Shakespeare was read under freer conditions. Large as the British empire was...it did not embrace all non-anglophone countries, and the reception of Shakespeare not only in Germany and France but also in China and Japan was, for both cultural and historical reasons, not really comparable with that in the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa.'

Shakespeare without English is an important contribution to Comparative Literature and Reception Studies and is an eye-opener to the varied contestations, collusions, collisions and conflicts that have symptomised the reception of perhaps the most significant icon of the English-speaking world. Yet it marks only the tip of the iceberg; adaptations and translations of Shakespeare in only the Indian languages themselves would seem to warrant several volumes of this sort—one looks forward to an exhaustive study of the sort in the near future for an incisive and historically grounded study of the relevant Indian bhasha texts have the potential of helping us understand the politics of reception in the colonial Indian context in a more holistic and nuanced manner.

Seemantini Gupta

Of Lonely Rocks and Upright Trees, Bengali poems in English translation, by Prabal Kumar Basu, 2005, New Delhi, U.B.S.P.D., Pp.130, Rs. 225

One is never alone in language. Tenacious traditions, competing contemporaries and clamorous critics crowd around. So one has to stand upright

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and speak loudly at times to be heard. A piece of writing even before becoming poetry carries a voice or many voices. Some of these voices are familiar or passé and some are unknown, strange or nascent. Some voices are recognisably imitative and some are uncertain and unclear. Some voices affect the manner of what is said, while some dominate it and reduce it. All these voices become silent in translation and what remains before the reader is essentially the content. If a poet has designed the content with aesthetic clarity it will regain a voice in the translated language, which will be close to the original voice of the poet.

After reading Prabal Kumar Basu's translated poems, one encounters a poet whose basic concerns are human sensitivity, empathy, integrity, environment, justice—just what is expected of any poet. What distinguishes him is his eager exploration of mysterious and innocent expectation of the miraculous. His mysteries and miracles are contained in man's relationship with nature. His sadness is born from vaccuities of failed personal relationships and the lack of dialogue between the poet and others. Not articulated verbally, these vaccuities are suggested by images as seen in these lines: 'Foot' –A foot is continually trying to fall in line with another. 'A few wily men, putting on others' limbs hide them in their trousers' or in 'Picture Pageant' – 'Only those who have never seen the sun will remain when night closes in, as dew drops in the grass.'

The expectation of the miraculous is intensely felt—in just four lines of a short poem 'Come Touch Me' where love will perform the miracle. "If you ever touch me I shall turn into a tree..... provide you shadow, lift your body up with tender affection...." Man becoming one with nature with the beloved's touch is not mere romanticism, it is a realisation. Is truth seeps slowly in the consciousness like a tree growing slowly but-certainly, like the concealed erotism in these four lines.

Yet another miracle awaits in the poem 'When It Rains' which shows the dynamic power of love that brings about dimensional change when it rains, the sensitivity of the poet makes him wet within. And through the ankle-deep water and slush someone with love is walking towards the poet from one end of the road to the other. The poet is wondering that he has neither a river nor an ocean, awaiting a river within him to prompt someone with dream-lined eyes to come striding towards him. This absence is a turning point where love unites him with nature. Wet from within, the poet catches a glimpse of the sky in trying to look at himself. The sky instead of the self is the dimensional change that love has brought in. This transformation makes him feel 'living all over again.' This simple and short poem grows slowly in a vast expanse.

If there is freedom and expansion in the poet's relationship with

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nature there is pain in human existence and interpersonal relationship. This pain leads to violence and black humour in surreal tones in several poems. This violence in some political poems becomes cliché in direct-statements. But in 'The Eternal Scape', 'The Night Sky', 'Behind the Skin' and 'We, the Living dead' the violence mutates in black humour, absurdity, fantasy or dark ritual within a surreal culture. 'The Eternal Scape' is a poem about a person going to the market to buy his own self for a meal that he brings home for his wife to cook. The act of self-cannibalism is delicious to begin with but ends up in bilious dyspepsia. Poetry makes its appearance in the last stanza where he revisits the market to find a man exactly like him sitting in a counter displaying the skinned and dressed self of the poet-narrator.

If 'The Night Sky', a poem of a cruel ritual full of fear and darkness, ends in profound pathos and tentative tenderness 'Behind the Skin' has pain hidden under the hide of social critique revealed in the end that is both funny and tragic. The last line 'my skin leaves me naked in public and vanishes' reminds one of Adamov's play.

If love can be liberating, marriage can be lacerating also. Prabal articulates the suffering of being together and living apart. 'On the Eve of the Wedding Anniversary' is a poem of marital conflict for which the poet employs the very appropriate metaphor of fire, since it solemnises the marriage and also annuals it at death when the body is consumed by its flames. Here it is the fire of discord and for the accursed wife, chilled to the bones at the end of the night "a pyre lights up inside me." This statement is both vituperative and a death wish. However, instead of leaving open space the poet herds the polymorphic associations into a facile statement in the end—"a new bed will be bought before the wedding anniversary."

The inevitable pain evident or latent in any marital relation is painted in a surreal picture in 'After Marriage.' Here injuries hang from every letter in the mailbox, blood stained-chemise turns into a vermilion-coloured cloud and the courtyard fills up with oranges of apple colour. The proximity of pleasure and pain become apparent in these confluent images and symbols.

The poet is at his best in his poems on the middle class and God. His unsparing satire on the society and his playful sparring with the Almighty provide not only humour but a proof of the poet's maturity also.

The very first poem titled 'Middle Class' rips off the veneer of anonymous insignificance from the unfeeling and self-centred middle class with short, sharp, questioning words. Cleverly couched as a confession, it is a criticism and sentence simultaneously. Another similarly titled poem 'The Middle Class' narrates a story. A farmer raising pigs and his family are

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content with their life; huge sunflowers bloom in his garden. All the members of his family living together look alike; so do the pigs. But the neighbouring townfolk prefer to believe they have no kinship with the farmer. That last statement shows the alienation of the middle class from life itself. The denial is symbolic of their own porcine character and lack of identity. 'Their Story' is yet another poem about society. It sounds loud with ambition but appears incoherent in content. Perhaps the original Bengali version must have employed varying patterns of rhythms and juxtaposed rhymes and this craft must have sustained the weight of rather straight forward statements.

The poems on God are funny stories told by an atheist as well as a heretic. The poet as a protester is also a poet caring for the suffering humanity. 'God to the Blind' is a story of a blind man painting God repeatedly. It contains rebellion and empathy, futility and faith emphasised in the last lines:

> The blind man at last ended up drawing his own face and made the eyes sightless. The boy applauded : this is exactly how God looks

In another excellent poem 'The Fate of God' there is initial confusion merrily arising from disordered distribution of fates. On finding the dropped fate of God Himself in the chaos, the poet grows to become God. To know and to choose are essentials of the poet's craft. Now God starts worshipping the poet, asking back his fate. 'As I am worshipped by God everyday, I have grown into a complete human being' is the ending statement.

'The Horse in My Stable' starts casually and progresses in a lighter vein gaining weightage from an absurdity of God tethered as a horse in the poet's stable. When the ritual sacrifice of the horse is contemplated the end of the poem drops heavily in the lap of the reader. Very subtly the contemporary with its acquisitive value system is ridiculed by invoking reference to past. Tragic Ashwamedha is the fate of both the horse and God. This poem continues to grow in the mind.

Any ambitious poem would be long, singly or in sequence. It tests not only the intentions but craft and competence also of the poet. More often it exposes the poet's limitations. In translation some such poems appear clad with scanty content (tattered in bad translation) bereft of the decorative accessories of rhyme, rhythm and music of the original language. The last poem of this selection bears testimony to this. 'People Would Tell Me' is a narrative of a person making a point with grievances against his mother and people. The impression is of an unwanted or deformed or rejected

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child born after a difficult labour. The entry of a blind beggar boy in the poem is a counter-point. Vague accusations against the mother appear as a refrain repeatedly and there is a desire for knowing Truth from the people. The people exhort the narrator to 'grow up and then....' Philosophical pursuits can lead any poet astray and make the poem verbose just as the poetry of socio-political commitment. The successful poet of short poems of love and surreal dream-world is overwhelmed by onrushing words.

In the end, from the book emerges a picture of a poet who is not closed in self-righteousness but openly self-searching. He has a crisp sense of humour and keen observation of the world around. He cares for the continuity of Life in its ecological balance because he knows of the personal as well as collective nightmares. He does not shirk from violence inflicted on him nor does he disown his own violent feelings. This is a picture of an honest man committed to life. But is it sufficient to make him a poet? Can the translations give an answer?

Except those by Barnali Roy, Subhranshu Maitra and some by Kalyani Ghose, the translations are far from satisfactory. One has to scour through dented diction, gawky grammar and tumble down pendulous prepositions and awkward adjectives and in the end retranslate these poems in mind to find a meaning, to discover the sad lyricism that is central to several poems. On the other hand, the anger and black humour forcefully assert inspite of obstructive translations. Now we realise that not only should there be more translations of serious and sincere poets like Prabal but they should be good also. Prabal represents the youth of contemporary Indian Poetry that does not accept an identity borrowed from the traditions or ideologies. His identity is clear and defined by his consciousness. There are several such young poets in Indian languages and they need to be known to each other and the readers. They alone will survive the moribund poetry discarded by the prevalent garrulousness of the media and the officious e-world. Before aphasia sets in let us save it with words of languages other than our mother tongue: 'One who is without a vocabulary knows nothing but the mother tongue.'

And let us rejoice with our close ones that amongst the lonely rocks there still are upright trees like Prabal Kumar Basu.

Dileep Jhaveri

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The Right Words by Shama Futehally, New Delhi, Penguin India. Pp. 303, Rs. 275

The Right Words, a warm and winning collection of essays and reminiscences plucked from the oeuvre of Shama Futehally (1952-2004), performs a commendable job of cementing a fresh perspective on her works. The chapters are startlingly brief and by themselves they stand out alone and complete as different flowers in the same plant, and like such flowers, each chapter can be relished individually even though they derive their *raison d'etre* from the same fountainhead of creativity. The book's title may also relate to the manner in which Futehally pens the essays and revisits the vagaries of memories, the way she abandons lead for the quicksilver and uses all the right words in delivering her message.

The book's first essay titled 'Listening to Meera' has a brief note on Meera's life, but is primarily focused on discussing the intricacy involved in attempting to bridge the divide between different languages. "....in translating Meera, or indeed any *bhakti* poetry, we are not just taking a poem from one language and translating it into another language. We are taking a generic entity and trying to turn it into an individual one; and no one can be expected to succeed all at once." What the above-quoted lines express is a catharsis of emotions from a writer who is driven to seek all the right words in her translations. It is in the following chapter titled 'My Experiences as a Translator' that Futehally gets down to explicating the pitfalls that translators are generally dogged by:

> When we look at this word-for-word translation, the situation becomes so puzzling that we are driven to question the word 'word' itself. What is a word? Have we understood this word correctly? And I think that when we begin to look at the nature of poetry, we find a clue to the problem. Because we find that, in poetry at least, a word is not just a word. It is usually many words. It is also a suggestion, an association, a speed, a breath, a sound. If you put a word into the translation without putting in all these other things, the word in the translation becomes very different from the word in the original poem.

In other words, the translator's job, as Futehally saw it, is to come up with lines that could stick out as representations of a colourful and

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fleeting intermediate point between the literal meaning of the text and the veiled nuances of mood and culture, which are concomitant with the text. A translator cannot do full justice to any original text unless he/she possesses a modicum of knowledge about the culture from which the text emerged. Drawing richly on examples from diverse translations of Meera's Bhajans and from ghazals by maestros like Ghalib, Zauq and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Futehally assesses the limitations of a translated work. At one place she seeks solace in Robert Frost's famous remark, where the noted poet had said that a translated poem is like a woman; it cannot be beautiful and faithful at the same time.

> A poem after all consists of infinitesimal combinations of word, assonance, suggestion, resonance, association, sound, rhythm, rhyme, music, speed... to reproduce it, you would need exactly the same combination of qualities in exactly the same relation to each other, in another language. In brief, this is not possible.

The above quote may seem like a confession of her limitations as a translator, but it can also be construed as a reflection of her intense attitude towards her work. The kind of intensity that pushes one to become the harshest critic for one's own work, and strive to produce literature that can be called flawless. In a chapter titled 'A Conversation with A. K. Ramanujan,' she begins by paying a quite tribute to the writer, who is well-known for his translations of classical poetry from Kannada and Tamil, "About A. K. Ramanujan, I think only one thing, that I wish I had written all his books." In another dense, thoughtful, and provocative essay titled 'Bridging the Great Cultural Divide,' she looks at the social aspects that go into moulding a writer's mind. The chapter titled 'Going Back to Ismat Chughtai' is an excellent foray into the enriching world of Chughtai's fiction.

In an essay titled 'The Human History of Partition' Futehally refrains from clichéd thinking that focuses on the polar opposites, or the right and wrong of the nation's Partition. Rather, her emphasis is on the eventual evolution of the divide, and our seemingly instinctual need to define and emphasize that divide, an issue that continues to invigorate the nation even after the passing of about six decades.

> But Partition is like a hideous folly committed in one's youth, which, as one grows older, one learns to see as crime. One learns also that the truth resolutely hidden continues to poison ordinary life and to corrode ordinary

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relations. So that in middle age one might, perhaps, allow the truth to trickle out; to begin sharing grief and guilt.

In 'Quarratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*' and in '*Sara Akash*: An English Translation,' Futehally is once again presenting a succinct analogy of the translations that have come into the market. In the essay titled 'The Worth of Literal Translation' which begins with a definitive analysis of Ahmed Ali's, *The Golden Tradition,* Futehally seems to be verging towards the idea that if a work is worth translating, then it is worth translating literally. But having said that she goes on to redefine the world 'literal' as something which preserves the meaning of the original vocabulary and also captures the construct of the rhythm, tone, pace, atmosphere, mood and suggestion.

With a subtlety that can be considered a hallmark of her writing, Shama Futehally makes her views on Naipaul's literature clear in the beginning of the chapter itself. She writes, "Let me say at the outset that *A Way in the World* is the most rewarding Naipaul I have read. I have not read much, having had the misfortune to begin with *An Area of Darkness.*" Few passages down in the essay, continuing her criticism of Naipaul, she says, "Whatever process of raw stripping has taken place between then and now, *A Way in the World* is written by a Naipaul whose only protection is to look into the mirror." Judging by these words one may get the feeling that in Futehally's lexicon a writer must always prove himself to be a pre-moral being who lives beyond the politics of trying to be hypercritical about the rights and wrongs in any society.

There is the chapter titled 'Indian English' which presents some interesting instances of verbal gymnastics that has now become part and parcel of English written and spoken in the Indian subcontinent. Not that she considers the slight tampering of the English language to make it sound Indian, as a sacrilegious act. Futehally could not be a prude about anything, not even the English language. Towards the end of the essay, she says, "I would venture to say that the unabashed Indian English of *Midnight's Children* is one of the reasons for the novel's success." In the chapter on 'Bombay ka Language' she is talking about the more street-level variety of Hindi that is currently being popularized, for good or bad, through movies like *Ardh Satya.*

In the last few essays Futehally talks about the more intimate aspects of her life and thinking. The chapter titled 'Things That Have Affected Me' begins with an answer to the question that the title raises, "When I am asked to say what it is in life which has affected me, I feel that one answer, in a way, is that everything has." That is one way of saying that in my life I have an ethical paradigm in place—I have to judge

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and imbibe from every right or wrong that happens around me. There is an essay titled 'On Teaching' in which Futehally discusses her profession as a teacher of English. 'In Kasauli - A Little High' Futehally dwells on her emotional bonding with one of India's most picturesque locales. "It was into a Kasauli mist that Shashi Kapoor and Felicity Kendall slowly vanished, their arms around each other, creating a fairyland of the heart which could only exist in that gentle era."

It is easy to fall under the contagious charm of the sixty essays that in their totality draw an inclusive portrait of the life and thoughts of an author who is well-known for her short story anthologies like *The Inner Courtyard* and *In Other Words*, and for her novels like *Tara Lane* (published in 1993). If, indeed, the measure of a life can be taken in how one tells its tale, then it has to be said that these sixty essays tell the tale of a life that has been lived remarkably well.

Anoop Verma

Build A Bridge by Gnana Moonesinghe Delhi, Konark Publishers Pp, 142; Rs.300/-

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Moonesinghe who devides her time between Sri Lanka and India, is a Sri Lankan who feels deeply for her country now strife-ridden for over two decades, and has through five down-to-earth short stories sketched a disturbing yet true picture of her unfortunate people. It is the rich that always seem to get away with the killings and the mayhem that follows a cleverly engineered riot, as also it is invariably the poor and homeless that normally undergo all the suffering. This is the candid truth that Gnana through her compassionate and revealing eye, reiterates in her compelling and easily readable stories that do not pad or pontify anything. Set amongst simple people who appear doomed to their fate in a world that they find difficult to comprehend, it tells the saga of commoners who must find their own kind of solutions to living out life as best as they can. That the stories and the locale pertain to wars, soldiers and strife, makes it doubly worthwhile for a soldier writer like this reviewer, to profit from as also recommend to other readers who might not know much about such a way of life.

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'Private Mohan' is the story of a soldier whose grandmother ekes out a living on a patch of dry land, and also looks after the boy's wife who keeps her sole company when the husband is away fighting a war that they do not understand. Along comes a journalist who becomes a frequent visitor to the home of the two women, who await the return of Mohan, but that was not to happen as he is killed in action. What happens next is the story of facing life as it comes or as it is thrust upon them, and shows the resilience and fortitude with which the two ladies continue to go about their business. Mohan sums up the life of a soldier [anywhere in the world, and as we saw during the Kargil war], when he says, "Who will care for us Atchie, because, once you join you will be known only as Private 3472 or whatever number is assigned to you. There will only be you waiting for me to come home either in person or in a box or even in a bag. Who knows?" But when will the civilian masters and politicians who rule us, ever understand the sacrifices of their soldiers who are sworn to die without even asking a single question as to why that had to be so. 'A Voice from the Carnage' is the depiction of a frenzied racial carnage where a member of a family sees five members of his family killed in his presence, and he, not having the courage to speak up or fight to save them from this terrible death.It is also a sad commentary on those who till a day back were friendly neighbours and acquaintances, but who today have no compunction in hacking to death those whom they knew so well. In 'Maya My Daughter, Maya the Heroine,' the clash between the Tamils and the majority community in Sri Lanka comes out vividly when a character says, "You are aware of our present situation—the slide towards total degredation for us Thamils. The marginalising of the Thamil people by the majority in this country continues unabated." 'Sudath the Rebel' tells the story of a hard-working boy who drops out of school to become a rebel and extremist for the cause of his people, and whose father is killed by the security forces. Ironically, this is the story of yet another person not directly connected with the revolution also affected by the events that have beset the country, and falls a casualty to the beliefs of freedom of speech and individual action that he respects and cherishes.

The short story 'In the Nick of Time' describes a couple, Savitri and Kumar, quietly digging away for precious stones on a land patch that they own, and the yearning of the wife for independence of action that she has never had and that she could possibly attain if she found a rare diamond on her own before her husband could do so. "But predetermined rules of living brought about the balance," and helped her to come to a sound decision not to disturb the trust that existed between man and wife. She told the husband that she too had been

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digging the patch and had just discovered the diamond, and that it was the good fortune of both the members. Gnana writes, "At this point, the gem and what it portended for heir future seemed irrelevant. Their bonding through their combinbed effort took precedence."

Gnana possesses a keen eye for detail, and sees life through a compassionate blend of hope and trust. As a first attempt at fiction this is a noteworthy effort and one hopes that she will continue to keep her ears very close to the Sri Lankan soil from where her stories and experiences stem forth.

Himmat Singh Gill

In the Islands of Grace, by H.K. Kaul, Virgo Publications, New Delhi, 2006, Pp. 116, Rs.250/-

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In The Islands of Grace defines H. K. Kaul's poetry in its most exhaustive form. In this definitive selection of Kaul's poetry, forty-three poems and selected couplets from the poet's previous volume *Firdaus in Flames* join together to form an incomparable volume of verses. This volume encompasses selected poems from the poet's four published collections and unpublished poems written between 1979 to 2005. The poems are divided into seven sections. In the last section that contains unparalleled couplets from the well-known epic poem *Firdaus in Flames*, the poet has delineated the forces responsible for turning Kashmir or *paiadise (Firdaus)* into a flaming inferno of disorder and conflict. Kaul creates vivid imagery, and enchanting scenes of the places he visited during his illustrious career but wherever he went his heart laments for the woods and lakes he had left behind. His poetry possesses many dimensions and myriad moods consisting of agony, pain, soothing balm of nature, exultation—a queer mixture of scientific and metaphysical thoughts. He has penned the experiences of his life altogether as a hymn and through his verses he transcends that very life into a sublime hymn.

A deep sense or rootlessness, agony, pain, trauma of leaving the paradise conjure up with metaphysical analysis, and result dynamically *In The Islands of Grace*. Indeed each poem in Kaul's fifth volume of verses signifies grace. Apart from portrayal of chaos and conflict, Kaul strings together several other poems that deal with diverse subjects. In the poems

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titled "In the Shadows," "Transformation," "Global Customs," "The Rocking Chair," "The Mistress," "Crazy Wheel," "Bundled Frogs," "The Mall," a unique sense of irony and sensitivity prevail. His canvas is wide and as he travels around the world, he paints the scattered landscapes with rare dexterity. Though the poet moves around the world, from the Indian territories like Kashmir, Kalighat, Kanya Kumari, to Piccadally, Hongkong, Thailand, France or Tokyo, but he is isolated and is pained looking at the sufferings around the world, and thinking of the wretched state of his land. Lakes across the world remind him of the bleeding Jhelum, the fleeting shadows of the devastated Kashmir.

Thus, even in Lake Michigan, looking at waters cuddling up to the ferries, the poet is reminded of the last summer he spent in the captivating Dal Lake of Kashmir

> In the afternoon I watched
> Waters cuddling up to the ferries
> Of Lake Michigan.
> I saw the sky soaked
> In deeper blue.
> The lake held it
> In her folds.
> ... ...
> Last summer in Kashmir
> The Dal could hardly mirror the blue.
> The weeds gouged it out.
> No ferries, but shikar as
> Housed on the shore,
> And their reflections
> Hid the cancerous growth
> Below the thin layers of water. (22)
>
> ("The Lakes")

Uprooted from the land of his ancestors, the poet, the people, the rocks, the birds of Kashmir cry in agony. The poet's helplessness while facing the terrible circumstances is reflected wonderfully in the following lines

> Why should rocks alone have sheltered these birds?
> Some lost their vision, some wings in the woods.
> Why should birds in the city crawl and cry?
> Some were caged, some were crushed by their kin? (43)
>
> ("The Uprooted")

The poet traverses the space from Kashmir to Kanyakumari where he promises:

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I shall come to meditate in her temple
Too hard for the waves to move and crush.
I shall come to see her feet are kept warm and safe
From the deep surrounding oceans. (68)
("Kanyakumari")

In the above lines the poet takes the roles of both a sage and a patriot.

In Tokyo, the poet is reminded of Buddhist influence in Kashmir as he sees the monks wearing his ancient wood-slippers and concludes that all roads lead to the same beehive.

My ancient wood-slippers
Thrown into a Kashmir well
Have moved on to Tokyo
I see monks wearing them.
.....
In this bee culture
Streets bear no names
All roads lead to the beehive (66)
("Messages From Tokyo")

Dark, disastrous death haunts the poet. Death that is devastating the innocent lives and blood flows through once crystal, clear Jhelum

Rivers flow debris of the dead heads
Into the growing sea. (18)
(Pundits)

No burials.
Only open graves.
Expanding battlefields.
The fast wind, clear sun
Level the graves under the feet. (15)
("The Victims")

Kashmir burns, the poet's verses provide soul-stirring uterances that open and close different dimensions of conciousness, penetrate deeper and deeper till they reach the innermost realm of human mind and unfold moods of agony, despair and above all helplessness on the verge of accepting destiny. But still in such disastrous, tragic circumstances, it is heartening to watch that the poet remains secular. His humanitarian zeal wholeheartedly acknowledges that

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Allah's grace traverses through timeless spaces
Washes clouds to darkness, of altered bases.
(283.172 Slightly Altered)

Allah alone sees through the windows of time
Let the Quran guide the subjects to the sublime.
(277.169 Slightly altered)

Teach the unholy it is only pure love
Which distinguishes the vulture from the dove.
(263.162)

Knowledge is a dark river running through earth
That balances birth, death and also rebirth. (268.164)
("*Firdaus* in Flames")

The poet's voice merges with all individuals disgusted with violence, fundamentalism, communalism and proclaims

We are all together, we are individual
Our society is one, our society is plural. (238.149)
("*Firdaus* in Flames")

Finally the following wonderful verse explores the depth of his consciousness as he reaches the greatest realization that

All paths grow with each breath of this universe
With circles and centres of time so diverse. (281.171)

The world is just not enough for the poet to traverse. He crosses Indian boundaries, and borders to reach the world just to realise as he passes through the endless web of planes and angles that connect his thoughts and action, till he discovers the key of his existence as infinity within and infinity withou . Pain and agony have transformed the poet into a philosopher. This transformation of the poet into a philosopher is subtle as is reflected in the poems, "Crossroads", "Dance of Shiva" and finally "Kanya Kumari". I personally feel that the poem "Crossroads" is a masterpiece in Indian English literature and the poet will always be remembered for his following lines

Every moment I drift from
One crossroad to another
Charting a new path
Between moments
Of despair, dreams, action, inaction.

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Endless web of planes
And angles that connect
To thought and action
To time gone, time coming
In a map of unchosen roads
I hold on to the key
To infinity within, infinity without. (58)
("Crossroads")

Mandira Ghosh

Kesavan's Lamentations by M.Mukundan, Tr. by A.J.Thomas, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 2006. Pp.232 Rs.195/-

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The original novel in Malayalam created quite a stir when it appeared in June, 1999. Since it was supposed to have been about E.M.S. Nambuthiripad, the legendary Communist leader from Kerala, the readers were curious to know what Mukundan would make of the deified hero of revolutionary Marxism whose sharp intellect shaped the official party line for close to five decades. In the event, the novel turned out to be something else. Mukundan did a tightrope walk between the myth that is EMS and the reality of everyday living in Kerala, creating a double-voiced discourse which scoffs at all manners of grandiloquence, whether it is the radical variety of the extreme left or the theoretical variety of literary criticism. The leftist reader who tends to read everything literally could not identify the deeper layers of criticism couched in the flippant talk of characters, mostly drunk. Thus it was that the novel went on to win acclaim, sold three editions in one year and became a contemporary classic. And the leftist government currently in power chose M.Mukundan as the President of Kerala Sahitya Akademi, the very institution he caricatures in the novel. One need have no doubts about the power of fiction in contemporary Kerala society.

This is not to deny that *Kesavan's Lamentations* is a serious novel about serious issues. A.J. Thomas has done full justice to the nuanced narrative in his translation. It is not an easy novel to translate for various reasons. It has any number of topical references related to rural life in North Kerala, with its complex caste and kinship structures and an involved political history of conflicts. The metafictional elements in the narrative complicate the structure

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of the novel further. The use of italics to foreground the novel within the novel is a commendable creative innovation. As the novel progresses the two narratives merge and the italics disappear. Mukundan's narrative revolves around everyday incidents and has lot of colloquialisms which are difficult to translate. But it is to the credit of the translator that he has evocatively conveyed the intimate quality of this everyday discourse. Again, the original abounds in gaps, silences and implied meanings which are often part of the unconscious fictional strategies of the novelist. In translation they have to be consciously produced using verbal effects. Here again, the translator has been careful to capture the complexities of the original.

Mukundan is among the pioneers of modernism in Malayalam fiction. His *Mayyazhipuzhayude Theerangalil* (On the Banks of the Mayyazhi River) which traced the colonial history of Mahe(Mayyazhi in Malayalam) through the lives of characters entangled in their own separate private struggles brought out the accomplished craftsman as well as the keen social observer in him. He has a special knack for framing and filtering history through the fragmentary lives of ordinary characters. In the present novel the protagonist Kesavan is a novelist with four novels to his credit and works in an office. The dull rhythm of his eventless life is disrupted by the occasional visits of some literary friends like Ravunni and Pavithran. When Ravunni finds that Kesavan is writing his latest novel about E.M.S, Ravunni asks him "What do you know about Eeyyemmess? One should not write about what one doesn't know." He goes on to quote Vaclav Havel to the effect that one should always write about what one knows. The novel within the novel traces the story of Ananthakrishnan and his son, Appukkuttan. Ananthakrishnan was a former Naxalite and now a convert to orthodox Hinduism, like many former Naxalites in Kerala. After his wife's death he brings up his son all alone. Appukkuttan, right from his days in the cradle, is devoted to E.M.S who is the sole object of his devotion. Ananthakrishnan wants to bring him up as an apolitical being but in the company of Aaman Sir, a teacher of the school and a card-carrying Communist, Appukkuttan becomes even more drawn into the myth of E.M.S. Under his tutelage, he does well in studies but also becomes a regular member of the Communist Party, to the great distress of Ananthakrishnan. His worst fears are finally proved correct when the young Appukkuttan is arrested in a case of murder. He had murdered a drunkard who was about to dishonour a photograph of EMS.

The 'lamentations' of the title suggests the travails of Kesavan, the creative artist in conflict with himself. The 37th chapter contains an address given by Kesavan to students in a college. Here it is apparent that he is under some pressure to align himself with public and political positions. As a

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creative artist this does not really appeal to him. His own struggle is with the material at hand which involves the lives of his imaginary characters drawn from life around him. At the beginning of the novel we see his intense loneliness as he is engaged in transforming his mental images into verbal form. He drifts through the routine acts of attending office and living domestic life with a sense of unreality. For the people at large he may be a celebrity but for himself he is a failed writer. His neighbour, Aravindan, pesters him for a job as he knows that Kesavan is known to many influential people. Ravunni talks to him of the greener pastures of institutional power a membership in Akademies can open up. But Kesavan remains his grumpy, angst-ridden creative soul at odds with the world around him. What he seeks is a certain creative joy. When he is satisfied with the title of the novel he is writing, he feels the kind of relief one feels "upon coming back home from walking in the scorching sun." He feels the pressure of the thousands of yet-to-be-written words of the novel as he pushes forward with its storyline. What isolates him from the world around is the invisible struggle of a creative artist whose final test is not his ideology but his self-expression through a medium which poses constant challenges. One can imagine his amazement when E.M.S. in person pays a visit to his house and blesses him. Kesavan obviously is confused because his quest has very little to do with the real E.M.S.

This is also a moment when the two narratives of the text meet and the fictional and the real confront each other. In a poignant moment in the novel Aaman Sir and Appukkuttan travel all the way to Kannur to participate in a political rally. The huge maidan explodes into excited slogans as EMS appears on the stage:

> Far away, on the stage decorated by red flags and streamers, EMS rose like a red sun. As if the sun, which had already sunk in the western horizon, had come back the entire stage was imbued with a red light....

Here Mukundan comes close to capturing E.M.S as the leader of a mass movement which has changed the political destiny of Kerala. No one who knows the history of Kerala can deny that the Communist movement has been truly emancipatory. But it is equally true that in today's Kerala that phase is a distant myth like the heroic lives of leaders like EMS and AKG. Appukkuttan's obsession with EMS looks more like a morbid affliction than a pursuit of idealism. Kesavan, ironically, writes that Appukkuttan had defect of vision and when he is prescribed spectacles, he is glad to find that he resembles the young EMS with glasses. A movement becomes moribund when it is unable to reinvent itself. In this sense, what Mukundan is lamenting

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is a certain erosion of imagination, a loss of creativity within Kerala society. Aaman Sir, the mechanical Marxist, we are told, "doesn't know how to dream." In the novel Kesavan writes, the two alcoholics in the village are the only people who speak the truth. Saravanan, the failed Naxalite who joins their ranks finally gives a stirring speech about the failure of our political movements:

> The Congressmen who brought about the first Independence and the Communists who brought about the second Independence are two sides of the same coin. What they wanted was only power.

Addressing the two drunks of the village, he says: "We three drunks are the creations of the two Independences earned by spilling blood and sacrificing lives." The grand narrative of political revolutions is reduced to a farcical footnote with a cynicism that is characteristic of the present Kerala society. After completing his novel Kesavan himself takes to drinking. And one night, while on his way back home from the local toddy shop, he is brutally killed by unknown assassins.

The original novel ends with a footnote that says: "Kesavan had bequeathed his copywright to the novel to Aravindan. After Kesavan's death, Aravindan became rich." However, in translation the endnote is about the axe used to kill Kesavan: "The axe symbolizes the RSS-Marxist conflicts in Kannur region that have claimed many innocent lives." This does some violence to the tone of the novel which throughout has been ironic and double-voiced. The footnote used by the translator takes it into the context of sectarian violence which the novel is not directly concerned with. In fact one of the things that Mukundan explores is the very capacity of fiction to represent the ambivalence and silence that inform our sense of reality. Fiction is a way of raising moral issues that rigid ideological positions tend to ignore. Mukundan reminds us that, questions of creativity, love and hate, desire to dominate and control others and moral questions of failure and success and countless similar existential issues will continue to haunt us despite the solutions provided by ideological treatises.

E.V. Ramakrishnan

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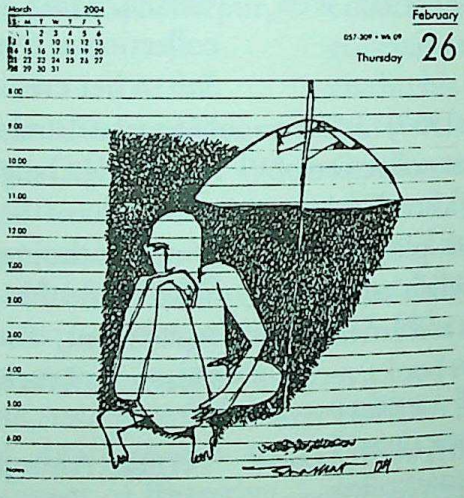

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IMPRESSIONS, EXPRESSIONS....

The idea of Indian literature being 'one, though written in many languages' is one of the founding principles of Sahitya Akademi. However, an ordinary individual gets to know about this only much later in life, through the happy coincidence of getting to read about the Akademi or to listen to someone speaking about it. But, for a youngster from a middle class family in the rural areas of India, such chances are very rare. The fact that Indian literatures have an underlying unity was luckily brought home to me very early in life, through the nationalist policies of *Mathrubhoomi*, the number one Malayalam weekly magazine of those days, which mainly dealt with the literary scene, followed by political, social and other issues of the day. This magazine used to bring out an annual number, a 'Republic Day Special,' in which short stories from all Indian languages in Malayalam translation would be published. Four decades ago, this was done with the regularity of a religious ritual. This brought into the impressionable mind of a teenager, life in the different corners of India. For me, the idea of Indian literature was born this way. Names such as Popati Heeranandani from Sindhi and Indira Goswami from Assamese caught the imagination of this young, avid reader. This was a different experience than the introduction one got from the sections in Hindi text books for middle school and high school, like the *dohas* of Kabir, Rahim, Tulsidas or the poems by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Mahadevi Verma, Sumitra Nandan Pant, Gajanan Madhav 'Muktibodh', Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' and others.

Then, the translations of novels from Bengali, Hindi, Oriya, Marathi, and from Kannada and Tamil nearer home, serialized in this magazine and in another one called *Kalakaumudi*, which began publication in the mid-seventies, built up my awareness about the diversity of Indian literature tending towards a centrifugal unity through similarities in cultural ethos. Apart from these, there were also magazines like *Janayugam, Chandrika* etc., which followed the practice of serialising novels in Malayalam and novels in translation from other languages on a 1: 1 ratio. Eminent Kathaaprasangam artistes presented novels from Bengali, Hindi and even from foreign literatures in a dramatic presentation consisting of straight narration, acting, miming and singing.

The unique capacity of Malayalam literature to assimilate the best of Indian and foreign literatures through translation has stood me in good

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stead in acquiring a comprehensive awareness about the various literatures of India, and generally about world literature.

Stories like "Abachoorina Post Office" by eminent Kannada writer K.P.Poornachandra Tejasvi (who passed away recently), mesmerized my early youth. Names of Bonophool, Ashapoorna Devi, Bimal Kar, Bimal Mitra, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Kamleshwar, Amrita Pritam, Kulapati K.M.Munshi, U.R.Anantha Murthy, Sreekrishna Alanahalli, Chandrasekhara Kambar, Pratibha Rai, Nakulan, Akhilan, Sundara Ramaswamy and others, and translators into Malayalam like Nilina Abraham, Leela Sarkar, Ravi Varma, V.D.Krishnan Nambiar, A.V.M.Narayanan, C. Raghavan, K.P.Sankaran and others, that appeared in the pages of these magazines still come up in my memory.

As I grew up, the awareness about other literatures of India growing through translation, wanderlust and migratory instinct coupled with imagination and an adventurous spirit reinforced with a notion of patriotism— a feeling for the Taj and Rajghat combined—gave a face to my idea of Indian literature.

The role of English, envisaged by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as truly linking the expressions and articulations of people in the various regions of India, knitting an all-India sensibility as it were, reaching out to nooks and corners—ironically, owing to our colonial legacy— where Hindi has not successfully reached yet, presenting at least to some degree—especially in the South—a cross-section of Indian literary writings, comes alive in *Indian Literature*. Indian English, which Sahitya Akademi has long ago recognized as an Indian language mainly through Nehru's efforts, has been producing a powerful body of literature through weighty contributions by illustrious authors, especially during the last couple of decades. Another development that calls for satisfaction is the fact that Indian Literature in English Translation is being adopted for graduate and post-graduate courses, at least in a few important universities of the country. English, my medium of creative writing, has certainly gained considerable ground through *Indian Literature*.

Recently, while going through all the issues that came out over the fifty years from 1954 to 2004 for the purpose of making selections for the anthology, *Best of Indian Literature*, I was amazed at the veritable treasure of literature the magazine has in its archives—from poets like Tagore, Kumaran Asan and others, through Nehru, S.Radhakrishnan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and almost all great masters from all Indian languages, through significant literary movements, to the works that belong to the contemporary period and to the pulsating present. Only Sahitya Akademi can maintain such a unique journal. Having relished the joy of contributing to it years

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ago while not even dreaming of serving on its staff, the new assignment fills me with a sense of destiny and mission.

During my interview for the post of Assistant Editor ten years ago, I was asked, by a renowned litterateur on the interview board, as to why I wished to opt for this job in the Sahitya Akademi, while I already had a decent government job. I replied that I wished to be in the world of letters even as I was doing a job; that, I wanted to be in the company of writers from all over India; that I wanted to communicate with them, interact with them, try and share their world. And during the last nine and a half years with the journal, I have had my fill of what I had dreamt about.

A friend, an eminent literary editor, made a statement recently: "An editor should read scripts respectfully, find out more about the author (and translator), and what he or she is trying to say...." I think this is a worthwhile motto to follow.

* * *

Now, to get on with business....

The very first issue I began work on, upon joining the Akademi, carried an interview of the well-known Tamil writer Neela Padmanabhan, by T.K.Doraiswamy 'Nakulan', who was a doyen of seekers from both Malayalam and Tamil literary backgrounds. Soon in another issue, we published a long poem by Nakulan in English, "King Cobra." Now, in the present issue, we are carrying his obituary. Nakulan, who wrote poetry both in Tamil and English, and fiction that was one of a kind in Tamil, was a formidable presence. As Sukumaran points out in his "Nakulan: Some Notes," he was a 'writers' writer.' Those Tamil and Malayalam writers who believed that only total freedom of mind can bring about any truly creative work, used to flock to Nakulan's house in Golf Links, Thiruvananthapuram, next door to the palace of the Maharaja of Travancore. His modest home was veritably the palace of the monarch of monarchs—the true anarch.

Oriya, one of the richest literatures of the country, is specially noted for its poetry and fiction. Over the years, we have been publishing in our pages, poems and stories depicting the rural scene of Orissa, which proved to be very powerful in their impact. Subhakanta Behera, in his piece, "Is there a Rural/Urban Transition in Kanhu Charan's Novels?" on the occasion of the celebrated fiction writer's birth centenary, traces the preoccupation of the writer with the rural ethos of Orissa, most of

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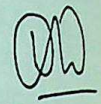
the time as a critical insider and his exuberant anticipation for modernity as found in most of the renaissance writers in all major Indian languages.

Jayanta Mahapatra is undoubtedly one of the most important of the living Indian English poets. He writes poetry in Oriya too and very relevant critical articles. Shyamsunder Padihari, in his essay, "Jayanta Mahapatra: The Poet of the Soil," brings out the poet's essential engagement with Orissa's spirit.

I am filled with anticipation, looking forward to the great association I am going to have with you, readers....



A.J. Thomas
Editor

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Nakulan: Some Notes

Sukumaran

— — —

We
come here to be
and
become non-beings.

—Nakulan

— — —

Prof. T.K. Doraiswamy, known as 'Nakulan' in Tamil literary circles, died in Thiruvananthapuram on the night of 17 May 2007. He was eighty-six years old. Death is not uncommon at such an age; but his death marked the loss of a pioneer in modern Tamil literature. He had begun his writing career somewhere towards the end of the1950s and continued to write till the end of the 1990s.

Nakulan was fondly called the 'writer of writers'. It may be a cliché. But it did suit him in its real sense. Because he had found his own path and reached his own realm in modern Tamil literature. In this aspect he could be compared with the short-story writer 'Mauni'—the first writer's writer. No Tamil writer other than these two could enjoy the privilege of having this cliché' associated with one's name.

T.K. Doraiswamy was born in 1921 in an orthodox Tamil Brahmin family at Kumbakonam. Very early in his life, when he was around 14, the family migrated from Tamilnadu and settled down in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. Doraiswamy graduated from the Annamalai University at Chidambaram in Tamil literature. Then he took up English Literature for his post-graduation. His official career was that of an English teacher in a private college in Thiruvananthapuram. Those who knew him as a teacher would not have known the other face of him as a Tamil litterateur,

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and vise versa. To have been born in a Tamil family, lived in a neighboring state and taught a foreign language—all these had contributed in giving a a unique colour to his writings, which are neither bound by geographical frontiers nor by language. He created a mindscape which is incomparable. He created an idiom in the language which is inimitable. And this makes Nakulan distinctive.

Having been induced by Ka. Naa. Subramaniam, the eminent literary personality among the writers of the renaissance age in Tamil, Nakulan started to publish his writings in the serious literary magazines of the day like *Ilakkiya Vattam* (Edited by Ka. Naa. Subramaniam), *Ezhuthu* (Edited by C.S. Chellappa) and others. It was a time when the language was at crossroads. New trends were emerging in the literary arena. Particularly, poetry in Tamil was getting transformed on modern lines, and was called 'Puthukaavithai'. Shedding the traditional meters, metaphors and older sensibility, was the need of the age. N. Pichamurthy experimented with new forms and this resulted in the birth of a new movement in Tamil poetry. With a good number of enthusiasts, Nakulan too contributed to the change. His poem in free verse "Kollippavai" published in *Ezhuthu* made an impact in the reader's mind. Though the theme of the poem was taken from an ancient story, the expression and its intellectual content were very new to the poetic environment. Nakulan continued this approach towards poetry till his very last poem. He had experimented with words, sounds and images which set an example for the new generations to have courage to indulge in poetical experiments. This could be the reason why he was the most sought after literary figure, for the new writers and poets.

Categorization will be impossible with Nakulan's poems. They are sometimes free and simple and sometimes complex. His poems like "Kollippavai", "Coat Stand" etc., are examples of the complex nature of his poetic mind. "Mazhai Maram Kaatru" (Rain, Tree and Wind) is deceptively simple. His poems like "Moonru",(Three) "Ainthu" (Five) are inspired by *Ramayana*. They deal with ancient human predicaments in the contemporary background. And they are classical in form and modern in content. Some of his poems are surrealistic. 'He was sharpening the pencil like severing somebody's head' is the image in one of his poems. In some poems, a riddle-like quality could be seen. Why I mention all these is to establish that Nakulan could not be put into any category, as he had developed his own genre in literature, because of his enigmatic life.

Nakulan lead a lonely life throughout. He never married. Though he was born among three brothers and two sisters, he was alone. He

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never complained about this. It was his choice to be alone, so that he, as a writer, could dedicate his entire time to literature. Nakulan did so. He wrote. He read. These two acts constituted his life. And this life made him an 'insider'. He travelled through his mindscape which was imperfectly lit, lone, uncompromising. These qualities of his personal life reflected in all of his works, whether it is poetry or short story or novel. The world is homogeneous. The outside world was never a mentionable thing for this writer.

The loneliness could have given him the strength to lead an anarchic life. He was anarchic in the sense that he never followed any religion. Never a devotee of any god. Never yielded to any ritual. Never cared for any morals except his own ethics. It was rare for a Tamil writer and practical with only Nakulan. He felt that life was not a series of compromises. It was versatile to the core. And his fictional writings are the proof of it.

He has written eight novels in Tamil. Alas! None of these novels had been published by any established publications. They are distinctively different from one another. They do not have a storyline, which is believed to be essential for a fictional text. His novels are voyages through the human mind. It is important to record that his *Ninaivupathai* (Memory Lane) is the first novel to experiment with the 'stream of consciousness' technique. Another important novel of his, *Naveenan Diary* followed the same track. The case of the remaining novels is not different. Exploring the human mind is an unending task. It might be painful and dangerous. But Nakulan effortlessly took over the task in his writings. This quality could be attributed to his short stories too. And this proves that he wanted to be different as any writer would wish, but he proved himself unique.

Though Nakulam did not enjoy a wider readership in his environment, but he was much admired by readers with serious interests. The newer generation in Tamil writing admires him with reverence and reads him with care. The word 'icon' may not be a correct one to explain the nature of admiration Nakulan had gained from the younger generation. But it seems to be some what like that. The anarchic life he lead and the avant garde quality of his writing would have attracted them towards Nakulan. Because, his life was an enigma. An enigmatic quest to understand life and literature. With Nakulan, it seems to have been natural and inevitable.

❑

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Bitasta Ghoshal

Dreams

Let the dreams go, go behind solace.
No use of fire in the extinguishing furnace
No need to decorate the bed
in the light-spotted darkness.

By the touch of the blue lips
new history will be created.
In the undivided, colourful map
new lines will be spotted.

Still, let the intense desire
remain deep, deep inside.
Let's meet in a new battlefield
right outside.

Translated from Bengali by Spandan Bhattacharyya

In Search of You

You're always there secretly inside
I look for you in the light of my eyes.
After a long separation and tiring existence
in the midst of imagination, behind the mask and partition.
I look for you inside again
with eyes closed in the dark

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Your smiling face crowded mine
and the new rhythm tuned my senses.

Translated from Bengali by Spandan Bhattacharyya

The Song of the New Era

In the midst of silence
sounds destruction,
the relentless noise of the falling stars.

By the Eiffel tower
along the Thames, the Ganga, the Sindhu, the Amazon
civilization suffocates.

Intense earthquake
destroys culture and memories—
the new day is ushered in.

Translated from Bengali by Spandan Bhattacharyya

Nameless Dreams

1

Staggered and stumbled
I found myself alone, one day.
Living in solitude with patches of dreams,
only once the sun rose
then it's all anguish.

2

In deep contemplation
I watched the setting sun.

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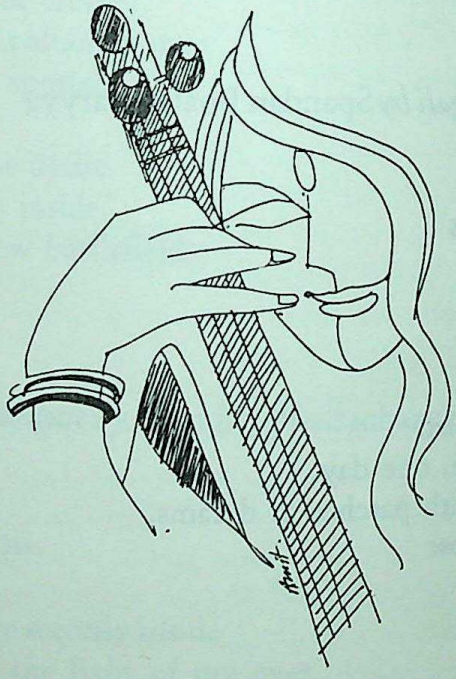
The sea beckoned,
like the prohibiting look of the dense cloud.
Was there any moon that day?

3

All is quiet, with
the gradually disappearing dream.
Vacant mind traverses the unknown road
and the air is filled with the smell of ashes.

Translated from Bengali by Spandan Bhattacharyya



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J. Bhagyalakshmi

Memory

Why did you pose that question
What should I like to be remembered for?
It dropped like a huge stone
Into a turbulent lake
It rose like a raging storm
Riding over restless waves
It gave a knock to the cobra
Already writhing in pain
Is it not the same question,
A formless one,
That nagged me night and day
Before you posed it so poignantly
With such accuracy and clarity?
Who remembers whom, for how long
And for what purpose?
How many came and how many left!
Whose traces can you find
On this sand of time?
Even those vague memories
How few and how far between!
Who am I to carve a place
In this amazing endless space?
And, pardon me, why do I need it
While I am always on the move?
Let there be no memories,
No recalls, no reconstructions
Whoever remembers, that is here and now
Whatever we do, that is here and now
There is no afterwards, and no remembrances.

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Making Invisible Visible

Before the 'finis'
I want this scene to be enacted
It is just a fantasy
A wish-fulfilment
Nevertheless, I want this enacted
He sitting at a distance
Lost in his own world
Humming to himself-
She engaged but relaxed
In her daily chores
With certain serenity on her face—
And me tiptoeing from room to room
In search of God knows what,
Or hugging my pet
And engaged in ceaseless talk
Or reading my books
Or reciting poems aloud
To my heart's content
Or simply watching out of the window
Totally disconnected with the world around -
It is indeed not powerful scene
In fact there is no drama in it
With each one in one's own world
Engaged in three different tasks—
Yet why am I fond of this scene
Why do I crave for its enactment
Just for once before the 'finis'?
Perhaps I realize the subtlety of the scene
I understand the undercurrent of love
I perceive the connectivity invisible
I savour the meaning of creation and regeneration
Be that as it may, tell me,
How can one make the subtle substantial
And the invisible visible?

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The Game

Talk to me
Only about the past
Which is solid and unchanged
Perhaps not so offensive now
As it was when it was present
When you talk of the present
Fine, it is here with us
Full of human drama
Or devoid of it
But you can try a smile
Radiating this very moment
Though smiles are hard to come by.
If it is the future
That is on your mind
Let us skip it
No one knows how long or how short
The move is
Don't you see this game
Where tails you lose,
Heads He wins
And you are here to play the game?

So Long....

As you stood there
A picture of perfection
A smile across your lips
With a hand
Slightly raised
As if to wave good bye
Something busted
You seemed frozen
Your smile looked pasted
On a grim face.
Who came between you and me
Who cast a long shadow
In that brilliant moment
Who radiated that thought

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Which was afraid to take shape
But could let out a silent groan?
Which wordless message
Did humble you and me?
When I turned my moist eyes
Towards the sky
The blue expanse had an answer
I am sure you too got that
We are divided in space
Yet connected
So long
Till we meet again.

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Jyotshna Kalita

Earth

Shimmering sunshine happy butterfly
Flying fickle patals

But where
Where did you see
Go catch it happy butterfly
Are not you simple

Brittle wings of happy butterflies
You will break it if you hold it
only the pollens will cling on
Memories of happiness

Come look
Look
The rhymed smile of sunshine

I am a sailor of blue
However does one see
Words emanating light
In the heart of silence

A child came up
And held my fingers
And said
Who showed you the way
Let's play at flying

See, see me fly

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So can you
Take off your fears
Stick them on to rose thorns

Zero gravity
No gravitational pull
But I know not how
To shed weight and be free

The east wind whispered in my ears
So simple are you take off your garbs
Hold my hand spread through the three ages
Happy butterfly fear of thorns
Magic of sunshine beckons of million stars

Who knows what rages outside the body
What lies beyond the sky
I am an inhibited sailor of blue

One two numerous moments
The day draws to a close
The sun drives the seven horses of evening

It is your last chance
Come ride on my chariot
I will give you wings of light
Tonight we will be the moon's guests

On the moon gaping hollows
You can make out from here

With cakes and ale herbs and leaves
What fare will the moon serve us with
Will butterfly happiness flit about there

The sun parts hiding gingerly
A wry smile

There was a kite made of hesitant clouds
To the world its strings tied down
Writes life's annals on the bounds of the sky

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Dense clouds deceiving clouds
I come down to earth
As the sorrow of the primordial couple

Harbouring in hearts
Memories of impossible dreams

What magic what charm
Do you have earth
I am your flitting visitor
The abiding shackles of your magic.

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

Sky

Something has lessened
Or something
More is now desired

Enough of complex theories
Wits touch simple words for once
True life

People
Happy people unhappy people
Easy people hungry people

As if something is missing
Or is it there
Perhaps it is alright
Or am I looking for something new

Love
Companionship

Ah! Such appreciative people
Fore once, more
A lot more

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Let me try loving people
Perhaps it will lessen pain

Translated from Assamese by Bibhash Choudhuri

Water

For what will you stay away, or rather
Under what pressure will you come together

Can you remain true even after the merger
Actually, even water loses its purity after mixture
Yet it continues to flow
Tries to purify sin
As if blind
Do you know what you can't see when you are blind

Translated from Assamese by Bibhash Choudhuri

Light

Even when blind darkness is visible
Is water blind then
Water *Gandhari*
How complex is water's simplicity
Even simplicity has so many names

Isn't it all relative
In the balance of desire?

Translated from Assamese by Bibhash Choudhuri

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S. Joseph

The Fishmonger

The fishmonger was washing the vessel
In the running water of the tiny stream.

He did not see the screwpines.

There is a motor workshop, where the stream,
heading down straight, takes a sharp turn.
He didn't see its laterite wall, either.

Parallel to the stream
To the south and north
The M.C.Road* raced away.

It's we the children who saw
In the water not even half a foot high
The body of the fishmonger lying facedown

The vessel, the scales and the weights.

Epilepsy having twirled him down
Water playing about his hair.
In the water, the screwpine leaf playing about
stabbing down and raising itself.

In the still corner of the stream
Water-bugs roam.

* The M.C.Road: The Main Central Road, the first highway of Travancore, built during the reign of the Maharaja, connecting Trivandrum in the south with Angamali, at the northernmost border of the erstwhile state.

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What one sees reaching that same spot now:
A chicken-shop
The workshop with plastered walls
The paddy-field filled in with earth.

There is no sign of the fishmonger.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas

Between these Lines

Between these lines
Sometimes I and sometimes you
may cease to exist.
We are not acquainted with each other.
We might have seen each other
In the town, or on the beach.
It might be you
Who stood holding the railing of the bridge
watching someone angling down below.
Or, we must have met somewhere
While going out to buy meat or medicines
We are just ordinary people, aren't we?
But we try to do extra-ordinary things.
You drive a vehicle.
Or open a shop availing a loan.
You pass an exam. You sing a song.
I try to write poems.
Our actions may outlive us.
I will cease to exist in between writing.
And you, in between reading.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas

The Mole

I know a girl
Who has a big mole on her right cheek.
She lived some distance away

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By the hillside with cashew trees.
Whenever she passed along the alleyway
By the side of my home
I would look at her, removing that mole.

She would pass on, head bent.

Isn't she the daughter of that
Woodcutter, she has no friends—said Mother.
Later, a woodcutter married her away
And she got a family and children.

There are no cashew trees there now.

Someone said
That there was something missing in my poems.

Isn't it the problem of a big mole?
I asked.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas

Identity Card

During schooldays
A girl came smiling

Our hands mixed the rice
And tuna curry she brought

On the same bench
We became a Hindu-Christian family.

I went about reading Neruda's poems.
In between, I lost my identity card.

"I saw," handing me the card she said,
"With a red pen it is written on it,
the account of the stipend** you drew."

** Stipend: For students from an economically backward background, stipends were disbursed by the government.

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Nowadays a boy and a girl, sitting together,
Won't pay attention to what is forgotten.
They will part ways after a little while.
It won't be surprising even if they join together.
There won't be any red noting
On their identity cards.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas.

Maestiri*

Went to work with a maestiri.
After eating the midday meal
Sat on the pyol of the cowshed.
A bird was pecking at the ripe plantain
Could I catch it?
The yellowed, dead leaf
Of the papaya tree descends, floating.
With that, I can make a flute.
In the evening, the maestiri said, sitting in the toddy shop:
You are not fit for this work.
You mutter so many things.
In between you stand still, thinking of something.
Instead of a hammer, you bring the hoe
Instead of mortar, you bring bricks
Picking up the iron vessel
You disappear somewhere.

The maestiri died recently.
The bird that eats the plantain
And the leaf of the papaya tree
Remain in my memory.

Translated from Malayalam by A.J. Thomas

Maestiri here means a stone-mason, but it is a word used in a very general sense in Malayalam, meaning an expert craftsman or worker in any field—for example, we use this word for a motor mechanic, for an expert cook in the village banquets etc. But the primary meaning is derived from the Italian word 'maestro' which is comes from the Latin 'magister', meaning 'master'. Also, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, andother craftsmen are referred to, with this word in a deferential way.

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Karthika Nair

Damaged Goods

(For obvious reasons, a lot of it is to do with hospitals and related demons, but not exclusively...I mean, there are other reasons that hamstring the individual: political rulings that determine personal relationships, loss, absence...there are a lot of bruised souls populating the planet! And this "damage" sometimes leads to a lot of creativity (some of the best performing arts ensembles I've worked with specialize in underpinning these ratios), to thought, to relentless questioning. This is my attempt to convert the damage into manure for something less futile).

—The Poet

(The following five poems are selected from among nine in the series—Ed.)

Afterwards

It still feels new, this moment metronoming my days.
Fuzzy-edged, it stretches like a twilight shadow,
while sore eyes adrift on a trolley lift in a haze.

Liveried attendants on wheels speck the weaving space,
blue-green with steel legs and burdens – yes, them I greet, though
it still feels new. This moment metronoming my days

returns for the thirtieth time; I wake sliced by blunt rays
hurled from a murky sky whose clouds clog my throat and slow
sore eyes adrift on a trolley sifting through a haze,

seeking feet, hands, a human voice, someone in this maze
of steel widgets and sterile breaths to tell me they know
it must feel new, this moment metronoming my days.

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My hand, decked with lifelines, reaches a papery face –
mine: a far planet, arid, though streams spurt rust and flow.
Then sore eyes adrift on a trolley peer past the haze

of thiopentane and pain to snag a surgeon's cool gaze;
he rakes my chest, and proclaims to a nurse, "It will snow."
Yes, it stays new, this moment metronoming my days,
when sore eyes adrift on a trolley lift in a haze.

Interregnum

Is it day where you are, or does the moon
loiter overhead, watching you like I
used to, tracing with an unsteady breath
those eyes, sleeping brows, the arc of a smile?
Do your hands still stray unbidden at night
angling to fold my beat within your heart?

It is an odd, wakeful creature, my heart,
tossing gravelly queries at the moon –
as though to smash the murky pane of night
and retrieve a name, a latitude I
seek: the exact location of your smile.
Delhi, Dhaka, I cite under my breath,

Bangkok, Beijing, or up north where the breath
scars the air still, white (like absence a heart):
Vostok, Yukon? Legends that made us smile
once, and contrail maps under a half-moon.
You had checked airline schedules while I
counted cash and clean socks that muggy night.

Your last letter said they woke you at night:
strands of memory that cut off a breath;
roving thoughts you cannot call to heel. I
find those in the mail, addressed to my heart,
dropped by the same russet-tinted moon
wearing faded love bites and a smug smile.

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Free from nations and rules, that tramp can smile:
no trolled borders lie between her and night!
Not celestial travellers like the moon,
you and I fill up forms, plead, hold our breath;
cling to vagrant hope that an unknown heart
will relent, sign, scrawl ten digits. Then I,

decked in new, numbered dignity, yes! I
could indulge this tropism towards your smile;
rush across to you, blood back to the heart.
Swathed as one in the ample down of night,
we'd learn anew to synchronise the breath
of desire, and shut out the strident moon.

Till then, though, there is just the moon as I
carve with hushed breath the template of a smile,
sword to end the siege of night on my heart.

Pillowtalk

Death dropped in for a chat
tonight, bearing a posy of queries and
a furrowed forehead. Perched on my windowsill,
watched me court an undeserving,
inconstant breath, and then smoked
another thoughtful joint.
He's changed a little, since we last met:
quieter, courteous, quaintly
curious; still dangerous.
And the hairdo, i see, is new as well,
with locks as tangled as my existence.
It suits him, though, quite like the fine
cloak of care he's donned to lull me
into ease, prelude to speech.

He wants to know, he says,
the voice [bass not baritone] flecked with wonder,
why i fight a battle lost
long before the bugles were blown; wild causes
were fine, but what was mine?

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"What is it you resist? Not me, for I am
no stranger, and have stayed true
since your memory began
tracing slender tributaries through time."
And then, what rankled: "Why repugnance, why not
fear? We made a pact: assent from you, and in return,
i would wield possession of your pulse,
train it to throb and leave it on a leash, not long but wide.
But now, I touch a chord of distance,
beats of a heart that drum refusal."

My eyes close, as his words course
down the years, rinsing recollections, retrieving
moments polished to catch the sun in their curves.
Death does not lie:
he has held my hand, never flinched, not
even when pain-filled fingers clawed sightlessly;
seen impossible dreams find words,
sail out on their wings and light up a starless heaven;
stroked my forehead as infant eyes
learnt the contours of a black, beastly respirator;
hummed limericks next to masked hordes
of surgeons, morphing one theatre
into another, shaping laughs amidst scalpels.
Eleven thousand six hundred
and seventy days of combat on uneven ground.
How would i define him: faithful foe,
lethal ally? I never really asked
for an introduction, didn't
even think of it. And, who, anyway, had time
for dialectics? My adversary was teaching me
to take his leash and gird the globe.

And even in these last months
- since i swapped consent for discontent, migrated
to an unknown land with no safety nets nor air cushions
- he would meet me now and then.
Trysts he inscribed in achromic ink in my agenda.
A glimpse behind the curtain
of acrid smoke and squeals of terrorised
tyres at an intersection.

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Just a fuzzy greeting, sometimes, in those last
seconds before the thiopentane raced
to hoist its flag on the brain, and unleash oblivion.
Once, when pain wound bands
- vajra bands, molten lightning – around powerless lungs,
forcing air to abdicate.

Memory ebbs, i see him
through closed eyes, and the sharp fragrance of paprika
nudges my nostrils: the smell of him, then,
remains unchanged through time and territory.
Eleven thousand six hundred
and seventy days of combat on uneven ground.
The truest of adversaries faces me, deserves
no less a gift than truth.
And in the telling, shall i learn it too?
I measure my words, spoonfuls for a pot of tea,
brewed strong and dark but not bitter:
"How can i explain? it wasn't you, nor
the battle – clean, constant, inevitable –
i deserted. It is the arrogance of Fate
whose dictates you will unsparingly obey;
the insolence of a monarch who delights in flooding
sandcastles of desire, in robbing my
resolve: it is that i resent,
and hence resist.
Her last decree, which reaved subjects of the
one power left – the scene of the final battle,
decided me: if i cannot choose,
i will pick up a new arm, deadly: surrender.
Shall triturate the treaties of war,
turn my back, walk away, and it will be the
nape of an indifferent neck your
knife will cleave."

Death breaks in, courtesy stubbed out
with the joint, "But what of the honour you sought?
surrender wins no wreaths.
What of your pulse that is bound
by covenant to battle, and knows no other cadence?
What will you do of the years or months

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or even instants awaiting my return?"
Hesitantly like a wintry dawn, a path opens
even as he rebukes.
"No honour, true. But why want wreaths:
i shall shatter, when you pluck out
my pulse, into a million iridescent
bits of shrapnel on the same night sky
where we sent my dreams,
and overhang this orb.

"And until then, i shall learn new things:
taste, smell and touch.
maybe wash out others: vigil,
weaponry, vengeance. Try, even, to forget
Fate's caprices, and my calendar.
Eleven thousand six hundred
and seventy days of combat on uneven ground.
But i shall weigh time
no more, just surf its breakers;
catch roasted sunbeams on my tongue;
and breathe the beauty of an airborne acrobat."

Blueprint

Nothing remains . . .
No edifices, no pillars, not even ruins.
Why write, why remember ...
Why keep anything?
Why, a fond visitor, knocking
aloud on my door, with no heed
for niceties, like the time of day
or thought. Will he leave then
if I say: because
the past is not hallowed
land, cleansed, untouched.
Let it be arable, breathing
soil (enriched
by the humus of memories) –
grapnel for my tomorrows.
I shall build.

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No turrets to kiss the clouds,
nor crypts to bury slices of life . . .
perhaps a cottage – thatched
roof, uneven floors, me-sized
windows to let the day in,
night slip out without tripping -
or a hothouse for wild, leafy
hopes. But build
I will.

Visiting Hours/ circa 1989.

I. 4 PM

No, can't say I know you; nor recall a friendship
from nineteen sixty-six (they hadn't spliced me yet).
But you are family – that's what Achan let slip –,

almost (his third cousin's ... nephew back from Tibet?).
He said to welcome you, do take a ringside seat.
I'm here for the long haul – yes, that's the new gullet!

In vulcanised rubber – brick-red – to fight the heat,
woven firmly around what used to be my waist.
They'll unstitch me today; it's meant to be a treat.

Achan? He went to empty the bedpan in haste,
and Amma for a bath. She needs a real sheep dip
after sleeping on this floor – dirt flakes like dried toothpaste

- the last fifty-one nights. But this was no planned trip –
unlike yours – with pit stops, friends, and tea with gossip!

II. 5 PM

Is that your son, Ma'am? Yes, he is really smart
for not-quite-three-years-old, but he's trying to snatch
I.V. lines from the Port-a-cath that fuels my heart.

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I can see he is bored. It's sad he can't play catch
or explore autoclaves: they build wards with scant thought
for young visitors here! The doctor and his batch

of interns are coming (hard day? They look quite taut).
Hie, have the reports come? Drat, I've to unzip my chest?
Yes, do get rid of them, this solicitous lot

of teachers, toddlers, aunts – and a neighbour's house guest,
before the guided tour – complete with photos and chart
– you will begin on my sinking dune of a breast,

drilled with tube wells, watered. Will you say, *this won't hurt*,
or *it won't take long*: worn mantras you must impart.

III. 6.45 PM

You are late as usual. They'll soon call it a day:
disconnect the spent sun, transfuse the sky with sleep.
We get fifteen minutes. Must you walk all the way

from school to prove a point? Buses, ricks, your dad's jeep,
all shunned in favour of your newly-retrieved feet.
You're right, if I'd spent months yoked to a cast, I'd leap

like Bambi on a trip, turn cartwheels on the street.
Sorry I am scrappy – it's my sixteen-year-old
self, sprung free for the night – but it's so good to greet

someone without a smile! You don't need to be told
how kind it was to come; you aren't going to pray
for my young, shapeless soul. And when your hands enfold

mine, hennaed with heparin, it won't be to weigh
the pace of a stray pulse. Yes, I wish you could stay.

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Nagen Saikia

Scattered Around Me

Several negatives scatter around me. I pick them one by one and see in every image—I, only I myself. But cannot be recognised easily. Because my hair has turned white, white dress black — all my colours have changed. Yet I can recognise me for my hunger, thirst, passion-desires, lust and affection— all are sketched through these images. Picking these negatives carefully I begin to go so that nobody can see the "I" within me.

Translated from Assamese by Gitali Saikia

He Has Come And Gone

I do not know when he comes. While he comes he brings bright golden sunshine and while he goes he leaves remnant of the evening.

Translated from Assamese by Gitali Saikia

Dream Sleeps Among Dream

Dream sleeps among dreamsilts petals open one by one like the flowers of the night and create new dreams. Every moment of these dreams swing between possibility and impossibility.

Translated from Assamese by Gitali Saikia

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Where Does The River Begin

Where does the river begin?—I do not see. Somebody kept me in a corner of the bank of the river—I am sitting here counting little waves—counting golden and silver fishes swimming in the river—counting sunrise and sunset. I am watching how the darkeness of night and light of day goes away. Roots grow under me as I am sitting here. I am sitting here.

Translated from Assamese by Gitali Saikia

No Permanent Place For Me

There is no permanent place for me, wherever I go I stay for a while —wherever I go I stay, I stay only for a few seconds. While I depart sorrow fills me up to my neck, and wets the words. Because that temporary shelter becomes a part of my love— who with unseen hands embraces my neck, shrinks and comes inside me; my grief overflows with its fragrant exhale. It seems that I touch its whole body and keep it forever in my memory this time of departure. Will the permanent mark of a temporary home remain forever in my heart.

Translated from Assamese by Gitali Saikia

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Rumki Basu

The Dog and the Ragpicker

I found these two orphaned souls at work,
scrutinising the eatable from what is not
because their necessities converged
at the public garbage bin;
the eatables went to the dog, the rags to the boy.

I watched them both,
they did not compete for the same things,
the dog sympathised with the little boy
for whom ragpicking was a daily need,
and the boy empathised with
the dog's hunger and daily quest for food.

Some days I found the boy petting the dog
and telling him his story,
on other days the dog
would tell him his own,
'necessity makes strange bedfellows,
and consanguinity is really about empathy'
or so I would think....

Days later I found them both missing,
months later when I had almost started
to believe that genuine fellow-feeling is a day-dream,
I saw them both at a local circus...

The dog was now showing
trained doggy tricks to the audience
and his trainer the ragpicker boy

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was talking and laughing with him
in a language, I could immediately recognise.

I heard their story from the circus owner
later backstage,
to whom both had surrendered
their daily need and their freedom
for their daily loaf of assured bread
one particularly soggy morning,

when they both had come to find that
the local municipality
had shifted and sealed
the public garbage bin....

Skies

There is a sky blue sky
tucked under my veins somewhere,
the kind that you see up there
most of the time,
cheerful, sombre, undivided,
at peace with the horizon.

But at other times
the blue sky could burn red
when my veins turn amber
sparkling like crackers or
the unquiet colours of the cockscomb,
breathing the aroma of
anger and revolt.

Often-time a black and
grey sky thunders up my veins
with a gurgling stream underneath,
the music and the dance of
the waters last for a while,
till the water vapours up
and moves back to the sky .....

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The aquamarine sky fills up
my veins now and then
I know it is carnival time because
it is a mix of blue and green
I am happy and sad by turns
in the effort to reach
a golden mean.

The white sky holds on till the last,
the doves and
the robe of the monk beckon me
to the edge of the forest,
or to the foothills
of the mountain.

I go along, beat by beat
and then retreat

Peace and repose
is where the mind's
white sky roams..

At Land's End*
(between the swami and the poet)

It is not just the two rock islands
in mid-ocean perched on
triangular sea waters,
ink blue, blue green
or was it aquamarine?
I am trying to count
the fresh footprints on the rocks now
as I stand between
the swami and the poet,
trying to touch my toes in Sangam waters....

* This poem was inspired by an awesome feeling of reverence and wonder which I felt when I was standing between the two rock memorials—one of Swami Vivekananda and the other of the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar—at Kanyakumari. The Vivekananda rock memorial stands since 1970 whereas the memorial to Thiruvalluvar was open to public viewing since 2000. The two rock memorials stand facing each other at the confluence of the three seas at mid-ocean.

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Since rocks turn mythical
with roots eroded
we need memorials now.
Here are two men who talked of real freedom
as though the pain of bondage was theirs alone.
May be they were just born
to feel pain in a different way—
the pain of fragility, of dispossession
of alienation and illumination,
the pain of being marooned
in sea waters,
separating them from us
and also from each other.

When the sea and the ocean waters mingle
and the seawind whistles to the sky,
when voices are drones,
when the sky stoops
to touch the waters at night,
in that grand OM hour
the swami and the poet talk
as they face each other
for a dialogue
on the art of living....

I know I'll come back,
to sea green rocks
in mid-blue sea,
I'll come and take the ferry,
row down that galley of blue
to wait, to wait,
for there are no walls in sea
wait to catch fragments
of that dialogue between
the swami on my right
and the poet on my left...

They say true conversions are rare,
but so are convergences,
I am ready here and now
for either, at land's end
at the confluence of the three seas.

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Options

My eyes had seen it all before,
but this time my heart
did not miss a beat or two,
but routinely ticked away
my options

Reciprocate, for
the green lights are on,
or smile with frozen words
on your lips,
or let the mysterious invitation
hang on forever on your contours.....

How do I choose?
When all that stands between us
are autopsies of previous choices,
the birth of a vision,
its meandering growth,
and the decay that follows
hangs like a Shikhandi between
his eager bud-like eyes
and my autumnal revelations.

I suffer in silence
because I see
only the later trajectories,
the river's losing out
when it joins the ocean,
or the flower's losing out
the day it fully blooms,
with mergers and full blooms,
mortality begins...

When I see his eyes
full lit and radiant
taking love's future course,
I grimly smile—
for posterity.

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Yet Quite, Quite Apart

Ultimately there are days
followed by nights,
or nights followed by days,
whichever way you look at it,
nothing in between,
except the sun calendar
and our collective destinies...

But the days vary
like individuals fates
trapped in concentric circles,
there are days which are
like the farmer's hands, or the sailor's,
there are days which are
like the tired legs of a
traveller's or a miner's;
days could be a writer's desk,
or a scientist's lab,
days could be all eyes, all nose,
all ears or all throat.

Days could be food, or water
it all depends,
days could be Shiva's Tandava nritya,
the waiting eyes of Sita at Ashokavana,
days could be Bhishma's bed of arrows,
days could be Buddha's sermons
under the Bodhi tree,
or a man's body
at the mortuary
and many more.

Nights may vary too
as shades of night vision,
there are nights of repose
like a forest after a night rain,
there are nights of frozen hunger
like Ahalya's stone,
there are fleeting nights
like floating underwater seeds.

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There are nights of anger
like a Rishi's curses,
there are nights of torture
like watching a serpent fight a mongoose,
and there are nights of repose
like a mating night-bird's call.

Yet quite, quite apart,
there are also night-like days
and day-like nights
where twilight vision prevails,
where nothing is pre-visited
nothing preordained, nothing pre-achieved,
hence nothing already lost,
nothing clearly dawns
and there are no clear sunsets.

It's so much your territory and mine.

To Meera With Love

For every battle you fought within
I was your soul shadow, your shield,
for every fear you shed
I gave you my wounded shoulder,
for every poem you wrote
I gave you my invincible pen,
for every song you sang
I was the centric basenote...

But there the convergence ends Meera,
for I live and love today,
my lover an earthly soul,
for whom I will not pen
verses divine but some
'here and now' lyrics and
move on to my mates

Dear road mates, don't invest
so much in Krishna and extra terrestrials

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that you lose out on both ends,
beware of the bends and turns,
It is a long road....

I am a little apprehensive of your Krishna, Meera,
reciprocity stands for icons too,
Is fidelity a word for
mortal dictionaries alone?
I on my part learnt
to reinvent my god
who is now a little over my shoulder
when I grow, he grows too.

And one final word Meera,
I will not advise my roadmates
to drink from the cup of poison
or give tests of fire
every now and then,
it's just that
we don't need these medals
from gods or men anymore.

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B. Rangrao

Guest

Come whosoever wants to,
Wide open is the door—
The madman in the house
Is helpless and poor.

Travellers walk together
Upon the way of life—
Pass the stations, one by one-
Thus goes on the strife

He is walking since dawn
Its close of day—
Across the surface of the sky
Appears the Milky Way.

The darkness creeps in slowly
Courtyard holds the signs—
Twilight sneers at the guest
As he yawns and is resigned.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

Birth

The news of my birth
Spread everywhere—
Old women and young ones
Gather around.

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Some would heat up water,
Some sharpen the sickle,
Others would tell my mother—
Your child is as black as you are

Her eyes had moistened
Behind the closed eyelids—
Drops of tear expressing joy
Come out from the foetus of pain.

She had delivered a son
All her expectations bloomed—
As trees and vines would flower
In the black and fertile soil.

But, alas—I could never
Support her hopes and expectations
Was never able to light up
The darkness that surrounded her.

As I look back now
The whole picture unravels before me-
And I feel as if,
My life has been a waste.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

Come Along, O Dreams

Dreams have built a nest
Upon the branches of my worn-out body
The sticks that lie across
Often prick at my sides

I walk on the sharpened
Points of these sticks, ceaselessly
And catch upon the palms
The bloody imprints that gather.

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These terrifying dreams
Lie flattened in my way
And, as I tread upon them
They get entangled with my legs.

I have been walking, even so,
A miracle of these dreams—
To lead my way further ahead
Come along, O dreams.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

It's Too Late Now

The mind has just assumed
New shades of being—
The tongue has just received
Sharpened tone of speech.

The spirit in the body
Has just come of age
Life has just learnt to grasp
Broader perspectives around.

It's only recently that I learnt
The restless words of silence-
It's only now that the new hopes
For tomorrow have bloomed.

But—as I look back I can see—
The gloom that pervades the past,
And I know perfectly well
That it's too late now.

Translated from Marathi by the Poet

❑

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Shahryar

Unspeakable Word

As soon as evening faded, my eyes
Fashioned the contours of a sea
And into it set the night's raft a-sail
Placed you on one of its shores
And chained me to the other
And yet
For a long, long while
My lips planted
The unspeakable word
On your body

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Sneak Softly in to My Side

Through the doorway of life
Sneak softly in to my side
Give a gentle push
To this sack full of ice
Sprinkle kisses on every wound
Caress every laceration
I will parcel out to all and sundry
This star-studded night
As if it was
My am birthright
Please don't decline

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This plea of mine
Sneak softly in to my side

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

What is the Harm if One Dreams!

Dressed in clear sparkling white snow
Someone wanders the mountains in search of me
Someone for whom I have waited for ages!
This hasn't happened, so it seems
What is the harm if one dreams?

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Speak Memory!

From the edge of a roof's balcony
Someone stares at me constantly
Speak memory, help me
Dispel this obscuring mist
Give some clues to her identity
So I may call her by her name

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Communalism

So many people
Half-insane!
Let my entreaties not be in vain.

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

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News Flash

The animals are engaged in a fight
A news flash from the forest has just arrived
From the lips of my fellow citizens
Have issued tales of past migrations
Their vision has abandoned the earth and shifted to the sky
While the winds hysterically wail and cry
Oh, what have my ears and eyes treated me to!
A news flash from the forest has just arrived

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

The Urge to Speak the Truth

For once, let this be done
Among those who speak the truth
Count me as one

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

In the Vicinity of the Body

Lips coated with sand, roses in hands
I hear the quivering whispers of a river's flow
This strange aura!
Whom do I feel in the vicinity of my body?

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

The Pleasures of Being Awake!

My lips locked onto yours
My hands
A weighing scale for your body

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And the smell of gunpowder far along the domes
After a long time I enjoyed the pleasures of being awake!

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Strange Pre-occupation

To squeeze water out of sand
Is a strange pre-occupation
Which I have been doing with immense concentration

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Another Prophecy

Once again the birds will fly away from the thick cluster of trees
The leaves will clap again
Once again, the branches will wrestle with each other
And the bodies of martyred buds
Will once again be scattered by the wind.

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

Far Above the Earth

From this celestial height, every part of the earth
Appears more breathtakingly beautiful
Than anything he had ever seen in his dreams
He would never descend to earth again!

Translated from Urdu by Salman Kureishy

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An Ascetic is Born

Anoop Verma

The nine-hour bus journey between Bombay and Khapoli was uneventful and he slept most of the way, opening his eyes only when the conductor shook him by the shoulder. 'Khapoli,' said the conductor tersely. The name of his destination was all that was needed to render Datta wide awake, and he hastily collected the plastic bag containing his belongings and shuffled out of the bus.

It was past midnight. A streetlight was out of the question in this backwater village, but the sky littered with stars and a solitary moon contributed a faint visibility, in which he could barely make out the contours of the deserted road jutting through a sea of fields, rich with crops swaying in the breeze. Trees, arising here and there, cloaked in a veil of all-pervasive darkness, appeared like eerie ghosts.

After walking for twenty minutes Datta found himself in the environs of a cluster of huts. The village dogs were the first to greet him. Barking vociferously, they converged from all sides. Petrified thinking that he was about to be torn to pieces by these unruly creatures, Datta shouted, 'Is there anybody awake in this village? Save me from these mongrels.'

No one answered. Datta tried again. 'Help me someone,' he shouted, 'help, help...'

'Who is it?' a sleepy voice answered in the darkness.

'A visitor from the city.'

A drowsy looking man, in his early twenties, wearing a loincloth around his waist and clutching a lantern in one hand shuffled towards Datta. 'Hush!,' he shouted at the dogs silencing them immediately. 'Who are you?' he asked, looking at Datta.

'A friend of Balkrishan. Can you direct me to his house?'

'Are you talking about the Balkrishan who used to work in Bombay?'

'Yes.'

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'He does not stay here any longer. He sold his land and left the village with his family two years ago.'

'What?' Datta muttered. 'I had no idea.'

Three or four villagers came holding lanterns in their hand. 'Who is he?' one of them asked.

'What does he want?' asked another.

'Someone looking for Balkrishan,' said the young man.

'Are you a sanyasi?' asked an elderly villager.

The query caught Datta by surprise. He was anything but a sanyasi. Suddenly he realized that the flowing cotton robe he was wearing did make him seem like a sanyasi. Thinking fast, he said 'Yes, many years ago Balkrishan had invited me to come here and perform puja for the welfare of the village.' Not quite sure if his ploy was working on the villagers, he added tentatively, 'As I was passing through this area, I thought I should drop in and fulfill Balkrishan's desire.'

The elderly man stepped forward and said, 'Mahatmaji, I am the village mukhia. It is by God's grace that you have arrived here. On behalf of all the villagers I plead you to spend few days with us.' He bent down to touch Datta's feet. Other villagers following the old man's cue did the same.

Datta could barely conceal his relief, and in a grave voice befitting a sanyasi, he said, 'If you so desire, I am prepared to bless this village by remaining here for a few days.'

In no time a wooden charpoy was installed in the centre of the village for the Mahatma to sit. Women washed his feet with warm water to make him feel relaxed. He was given sweetened water to drink and hastily cooked porridge to eat.

Not only was this extravagant devotion surprising to Datta, it was also amusing. It being in his interest to keep the gullible villagers deluded and accept their hospitality for a few days, if not for weeks, he was most exuberant in showering blessings on everyone. In the end he was successful in putting up a good enough act of a genuine Mahatma.

The villagers decided that the Ganpati temple, the only concrete structure in the village, was the right place for the august Mahatma to reside. Datta was led to the Ganpati temple, located about 100 yards away from the centre of the village. Under the awning of its verandah, a wooden charpoy, mattress, bed sheet and pillow were arranged for the Mahatma to rest. After another round of obeisance, the villagers left.

As Datta lay on the bed, he contemplated on the vagaries of destiny during the day he had been a worthless scavenger and a thief, but at

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night he was finding himself transformed into a revered Mahatma. 'God, your ways are beyond comprehension of a mere mortal like me,' he murmured to himself.

Mr. Mehta opened the door to find Datta, the local scavenger standing outside. 'Namaskar sahib,' said Datta, 'I heard that you were looking for me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Mr. Mehta, 'water is flowing back in my bathroom commode.'

'The gutter outside must be clogged sahib,' said Datta knowingly.

They went to the gutter, located on the street outside the house. A nauseating stench filled the air as Datta removed the manhole cover. Mr. Mehta withdrew by few steps to escape the stench. Covering his nose with a handkerchief, he uttered, 'so, what is it!'

'The gutter is clogged, sahib,' said Datta peering into the vile gooey substance that filled the gutter.

'Clear it!' said Mr. Mehta brusquely.

Datta smiled obsequiously. 'Sahib it is very hard work.'

'I know, I know, it will not take you more than five minutes to clear this manhole.'

'Sahib, I will get sick clearing this thing, you must pay me ten rupees for this work.'

'Clear it first, we can talk about money later,' pompously said Mr. Mehta before marching back into his house.

Using a shovel Datta began extricating lumps of black substance, which he dumped into a broken plastic bucket. With every shovelful that he unearthed, came a new dose of vile stench but that hardly affected Datta, who had scavenging in his blood. Born in a family of scavengers, cleaning toilets and clearing gutters had been his fate since he was barely out of his childhood. Now in his middle age, he had worked through so many rotting gutters that no stench, howsoever vile, could bother him.

When the bucket was filled with the black mass, he carried it on his head to a nearby dumping ground and emptied it before returning to the gutter to begin anew the process of filling the bucket. Only this time he encountered something completely unexpected. As he was pulling another shovelful from the gutter a bright metallic glint in the black mass caught his eye. He placed the shovel down and pulled the metallic object out.

Even though it was coated in muck, Datta realized in no time that he was holding a necklace, possibly made of gold. He looked around

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suspiciously to see if anyone's prying eyes had caught him with his find. There was no one around. Datta hastily hid the necklace in his clothes and carried on as usual with the work of clearing the gutter. But his mind was now obsessed with the necklace. He could not cease to wonder how much his treasure was worth.

Maybe someone would give him 500 or even 1000 rupees for the necklace. He gasped at the amount. Was it possible that the necklace was worth that much? He decided to take another look at it and surreptitiously pulled it out of his pocket. Holding it in the palm of his left hand he rubbed it with the fingers of his right hand to make the metal shine brighter. Ah, it was definitely gold; the dull yellowish glint reassured him. What a lucky day this was turning out to be!

'What is it you have in your hand?' a harsh voice sounded.

'Its no...nothing,' Datta stammered, taken aback by Mr. Mehta's sudden appearance.

'You are hiding something, show it to me.'

'It is just a bauble I found in the gutter,' pleaded Datta, clutching the necklace firmly in his hand.

'Show it to me,' shouted Mr. Mehta.

But Datta didn't want to handover the necklace to Mr. Mehta. 'It is my necklace,' obstinately he uttered, 'I found it.'

'If you don't hand it over I will have to call the police.'

It was the first time in his life that a piece of gold had come into his possession, and Datta was adamant not to let go of it easily. Before Mr. Mehta could realize what was happening, Datta was on his feet and scampering down the street. The cries of 'stop, thief' that issued from Mr. Mehta's mouth only availed to make Datta run even faster and in no time he was out of the colony.

He still clutched the necklace in his hand. But the necklace would hardly amount to anything once he was in jail. He had no doubt at all that Mr. Mehta would have reported the matter to the police by now. Maybe the police were already looking for him. With his clothes caked with slush from the gutter he had already left a trail of smell that would easily lead the police to him. It was only a question of days if not hours before he was apprehended and sent to jail. He decided that leaving Bombay was his best option.

He remembered his friend Balkrishan, who had once been a scavenger like him. Five years ago, Balkrishan had left Bombay and retired to a village called Khapoli along with his wife to eke out a living as a farmer from a small plot of ancestral land. Before departing from Bombay, he had told Datta that if ever a need arose, he could count on him.

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Now the need had arisen. Datta made up his mind to flee to Khapoli and spend a few weeks with Balkrishan.

He rushed to his house, a hovel in a nearby slum, where he quickly washed himself and changed into a flowing cotton robe, which a temple priest, whose gutter he had once cleaned, had given him out of kindness. In a small box concealed on the rafter of his house, he had around 70 rupees—small notes and coins. He emptied the entire amount into his pocket, hoping it would suffice for the fare to Khapoli. And in another hour he was in a bus bound for south Maharashtra.

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Next day he woke to the pleasant sound of birds singing in the fields and went to the small river flowing behind the temple for his ablutions. When he returned to the temple, villagers were waiting for him. They had brought with them incense sticks, sweets and other puja materials. The mukhia said, 'Mahatmaji, will you be conducting the morning aarti now?'

Datta had not given any thought to conducting a morning *aarti* but he recovered quickly and said, 'Of course, I always start my day with puja.'

In Bombay, he occasionally used to visit temples, so he had a sort of elementary knowledge about the way an *aarti* was conducted. In the end he was able to put up a show good enough to impress the simple villagers. After puja he sat down for breakfast, which some village women had brought for him. Feeling ravenously hungry, he almost pounced on the food consisting of warm *poha* and curd sweetened with jaggery.

'Mahatmaji, I thank you on behalf of the village for allowing us to take care of your needs,' the old mukhia said.

'Ganpati is the sole mover in the material world,' Datta said nonchalantly, his mouth full of food, 'if my feet have brought me here then the credit for that goes to Ganpati. He wanted me to be among honest souls so he brought me here.'

The mukhia folded his hands in supplication and implored, 'Mahatmaji, we villagers rarely get a chance to meet a divine person like you. Please give us a *pravachan*.'

It was not difficult for Datta to fulfill this request. Even though a scavenger, he always had a gift for words. He finished his food and then gave a short speech full of banalities about the munificence and greatness of Ganpati. The villagers listened with rapt attention.

At the end of his speech Datta rose and said, 'I want all of you to repeat after me the *maha-mantra* which I will now recite:

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Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare.
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare.

This was the only hymn that he knew, having learned it from some hippies in Bombay. The villagers got up and repeated the *maha-mantra* as they heard it.

'Mahatmaji, the priest of this temple died six months ago,' said the mukhiya. Since then our temple has been without any priest. Will you be the priest here? We are poor folks but we shall share with you all we have.'

'Please condescend to be the priest of this poor village,' an old woman pleaded.

'We need a holy man like you to make our lives worth living,' another villager droned.

Datta had no intention of making a life-long career of being a Mahatma to these ignorant peasants. He felt sure that if he lived here for more than one or two months, he would die of boredom. Even cleaning gutters in Bombay was a better job than being a Mahatma to these threadbare rustics. There was no chance of his staying here permanently. After a few weeks he would positively be off for Bombay.

'I am a humble vassal of Ganpati,' he said philosophically. 'If it is his will that I should spend the rest of my life here, then I will remain here. But if he desires to send me elsewhere then I will have to obey him.'

When the villagers left to work in their fields, Datta remained behind, sitting on the charpoy, and musing about the great turnaround his life had taken. Him a revered Mahatma! How ludicrous! How unbelievable! How surprised his friends in Bombay would be if they saw him in this mahatma's avatar! How about the uppity Mr. Mehta? He laughed. He pulled out the necklace from his pocket and gazed at it with affection. There was hardly any doubt in his mind that he had done the right thing in escaping with the necklace.

After some time he started on a peregrination through the narrow mud paths that crisscrossed the paddy and vegetable fields. The air carried the fresh and natural smell of fields laden with ripening crop, among which fluttered birds and butterflies of myriad hues. The farmers working in the fields greeted him with folded hands. He returned their greetings and at times waited to exchange a few words before moving onward. An hour's walk brought him to the residential area of the village, where he had arrived on the previous in the middle of the night.

In broad daylight he could see all that had remained shielded in

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the night's cloak of darkness. The houses, little more than hovels, were made out of dried mud, grass and bamboo. In the centre of the village was a well, from which village women were drawing water with a bucket tied to a long jute rope. Teenage girls were drying pats of cow dung-to be used as fuel. Children with dust caked to their bodies scurried about playfully. A few old women sat under the shade of a mango grove, situated beside the well, chatting with each other and keeping watch on the playing children.

'Pranam Mahatmaji, it is good of you to grace our humble household,' a woman smiled, displaying all her rotten teeth.

'I was passing by,' said Datta.

'You must remain for a while and bless our children,' another woman said.

A young girl hurried off to a hut and fetched a coir mat, which was spread on the ground below a tree. Datta sat on the mat; the women congregated around him and started introducing their children and grandchildren to him. He touched each child on its head and droned some meaningless words. One woman brought her frail child who appeared to be quite sick; he had been vomiting since morning, the mother said.

'Isn't there a doctor in this village?' asked Datta.

'How can we poor village people afford to have a doctor, Mahatmaji?' the child's mother lamented.

'Who needs a doctor when someone as divine as you is with us,' another woman opined.

Datta had no desire to take on himself the responsibility for curing a sick child. What if the child died? 'My advice is you take this child to a doctor. He is very sick,' he said. The child's mother started sobbing and seeing his mother cry the child too began to wail. 'There is no need to cry,' Datta said. 'A doctor will cure him in no time.'

'The nearest doctor is in the town, thirty kilometers away. It is not easy to reach there,' an old woman said.

'Please invoke an incantation to cure my child,' the mother pleaded, 'I beseech you.'

The persistence of the sick child's mother forced Datta to at least pretend to do something. He pulled out a thread from the hem of his garment and chanting some meaningless mantras he tied the thread on the sick child's arm. 'Make him drink boiled water mixed with jaggery and salt frequently throughout the day,' he said to the mother, 'he should be fine by evening.' He had heard from someone that a concoction of boiled water, jaggery and salt was an effective cure for vomiting.

When he returned to the temple at noon, some villagers were waiting

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for him with his lunch. He had his fill and then lay down on the bed for a siesta. In the evening, just before sunset, there was another round of prayers at the Ganpati temple at which most of the villagers were present. The woman, whose sick child he had attended to, was at the prayer. She came forward after the prayer was over and touched his feet. With a beaming smile she exulted, 'Mahatmaji as you had foretold, my son is fine now.'

'I knew he would be alright,' Datta said happily, 'Ganpati wanted him to get well.'

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In the days that followed Datta's reputation continued to grow. Ever increasing number of villagers thronged the *aartis* that he conducted daily in the mornings and evenings. And his role did not remain confined to a temple priest and a faith healer, as the poor villagers began seeking his counsel in all sorts of matters. Before long the scavenger from Bombay found himself arranging marriages, advising on family matters, blessing the fields at the time of sowing so that the yields may be bountiful, conducting *yajnas* for a good rainy season and things like that.

By simple word of mouth publicity, his fame spread to neighboring villages and towns. People started coming to Khopoli for the sole reason of having a *darshan* of the great Mahatma. No one ever inquired—as to who he was or where he had come from. Just the fact that he was there, in front of their eyes, was good enough for his devotees. They narrated their woes to him and implored him to intercede with God on their behalf. He gave them assurance along with whatever practical advice he could think of.

Often his devotees gave him cash offerings, always in trifling amounts, as all of them were equally destitute. But cash of the smallest denomination is still cash — something to covet — and it pleased Datta to receive monetary offerings. He hoarded the cash in a copper urn, which he kept carefully hidden behind a loose brick in the temple wall. In the same urn he kept the necklace that he had brought with him from Bombay. Someday he still hoped to sell the necklace at a high price. But till that happened it was his property, and it was a glorious feeling for him to be the owner of a costly gold necklace.

As the villagers took care of all his needs — food, clothes and other sundry requirements — he hardly ever incurred any personal expenses, and all his earning ended up in the copper urn. He relished the idea that someday when he was back in Bombay, he would spend all the money on booze and women and have a very good time. Every few

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days -- always in the night, when he was alone—he used to take the urn out from its hiding place and gaze lovingly at his costly gold necklace and count the money he had hoarded. It thrilled him to see his fortune spread before his eyes.

He had come to Khapoli for few weeks only but three years passed and he was still there. His life had got so interlaced with that of his devotees that he found it difficult to extricate himself from the village and his trip back to Bombay kept getting postponed. He was always busy curing someone or finding a groom for some poor chap's daughter or settling disputes between different parties or praying for crops or in some other social activity. But despite his hectic life, Bombay always remained in the back of his mind.

At nights, when he lay alone on the cot outside the temple, he would burn with desire to rush back to Bombay where he could spend his days cleaning gutters and the nights getting soaked up in the local tavern. He had not had a single sip of alcohol since he dropped into the village. Oh how he craved for the feeling of fiery alcohol pouring down his gullet! How desperate his senses were for the smells and sounds of the tavern! But the thought of some pressing problem that anyone of his devotees was facing, always stopped him from making a move towards the city. He would tell himself that once that devotee's problem was taken care of he would depart. And there was no dearth of woebegone villagers to keep holding him back at Khapoli.

Meanwhile the money he was hoarding in the copper urn kept growing. One day when he finished counting he was pleasantly surprised to find his fortune more than 50,000 rupees. The large sum gave rise to a new desire in his mind. He was forty-eight years old. Wasn't it high time for him to settle down with a woman in a house of his own? He asked himself. But 50,000 was not sufficient to purchase a house in Bombay, one needed at least one-lakh rupees for that. He decided to continue milking the foolish villagers till he had collected one lakh rupees and then bolt towards Bombay.

There he would find a woman who was a wonderful cook, marry her and settle down with her in a house of his own. It would take him at least another three years to reach the magic figure of one lakh if he continued receiving monetary contributions at the present rate.

He felt furious at the villagers for their stinginess. If they donated liberally he would have already left this detestable backwater village with one lakh in his pocket. Oh how he hated being a Mahatma!

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It was morning. He had just finished conducting the morning *aarti* and was now sprinkling holy water on the devotees, when his eyes landed on a middle-aged man, tall, fat, head crowned with fussily combed hair, eyes shielded by fashionable dark goggles, dressed in a silk safari suit that did nothing to hide his ample potbelly. Thick gold chain dangled from his neck and many of his fingers were adorned with gold rings.

Obviously a man of means, perhaps a rich businessman, Datta thought and instinctively his eyes wandered to the man's pockets, which bulged. 'There is more than 5000 rupees inside that pocket,' he told himself licking his lips. Suddenly the man stepped forward and touched Datta's feet.

'Mahatmaji, bless me,' he said.

Datta was pleasantly surprised to see that his magic worked not only on the ignorant peasants, but on the higher strata of society as well. This was the first time that a prosperous man had touched his feet. 'Get up bhakta,' he said solemnly. 'My blessings are always with all devotees of Ganpati.'

The man rose and said, 'I heard about your divine powers from certain acquaintances, so I came here to seek your blessings. When you were conducting the *aarti*, I don't know what came over me, I felt as if I could see Ganpati inside you.'

'Ganpati is everywhere and in everything. All it needs to visualize him is a pure and devoted mind. You could see him inside me because you came here with an unsullied mind.'

'Mahatmaji, please condescend to accept a humble offering from me,' the man said fervently.

'Whatever you give, Ganpati will return to you thousand fold.'

The man fished out two, crisp five hundred rupee notes from his pocket and offered them to Datta. Never before had Datta received this big a contribution. He was thrilled and in his excitement snatched the money from his devotee's hands. 'What is your name bhakta?' he panted.

'People call me Chandulal Shah, Mahatmaji.'

'Chandulal, my most fervent blessings are with you,' Datta said lavishly, while pocketing the cash. With a bow Chandulal Shah walked out of the temple.

When the temple was empty of the devotees Datta took out of his pocket the two, five hundred rupee notes and gazed at them longingly. He was handling notes of such high denomination for the first time in his life.

Two days later Chandulal again materialized at the time of morning

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aarti. On this occasion as well he donated one thousand rupees. Datta's joy knew no bounds, if he continued to receive one thousand rupees every two days, then he would be able to amass one lakh rupees much earlier than expected.

He visualized himself leaving for Bombay with one lakh rupees, much sooner than he earlier anticipated and laughed with glee. His euphoria subsided a bit when he realized that there was no guarantee that Chandulal would continue giving a thousand rupees on a regular basis. After all, no one could afford to be such a spendthrift. Still he hoped for the best.

When another two days passed Datta was breathless with anticipation at the thought of Chandulal coming to make another donation of one thousand rupees. Throughout the *aarti* his eyes kept looking for Chandulal, but this time his generous donor failed to arrive. Soon the *aarti* was over. Gloom descended on Datta. He tried to perk himself up by thinking that Chandulal could not come today because of some urgent work, but tomorrow he would surely show up. Next day as well Chandulal failed to materialize; the day after, again no sign of him; the day after that, still no Chandulal.

Two weeks passed by and just when Datta was on the verge of losing all hope of ever meeting his lavish devotee again, Chandulal showed up, resplendent in spotless safari suit, dark goggles, gold chain, and gold rings. When the puja was over and Chandulal stepped forward to make his customary donation of one thousand rupees, Datta whispered secretly, 'I want to have a private word with you. Can you wait for the crowd to leave?'

'I will do that, Mahatmaji,' Chandulal responded.

A few minutes later when the villagers had left, Datta sat with Chandulal Shah on the temple steps and asked, 'Where have you been for all these days?'

'The affairs of my business kept me busy.'

'I guessed as much,' Datta chuckled. 'It is a good thing that your business is doing well.'

'By your blessings, since the day I first visited this temple, I have received many new lucrative contracts.'

'I am glad to hear that. What business are you in?'

'I am in the import-export business.'

Datta had heard it spoken in Bombay that those in import-export business were always wallowing in money. An idea germinated in his mind and he said, 'If I give you 50,000 to invest in your business today, how long will it take for it to become 100,000?'

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If Chandulal was surprised at the question, he did not show it. He said simply, 'my business yields high dividends. I can turn 50,000 into 100,000 in at the most one month.'

Datta was delighted; he had found a way of discarding the Mahatma's garb and becoming a normal person in as short a time as one month. He got up silently and from the copper vessel he retrieved almost all its cash, which amounted to little over 50,000. 'Take this money,' he said to Chandulal, 'invest it in your business and bring me one lakh rupees as quickly as you can. If you do so, the blessing of Ganpati will always be on you and your family.'

'Your word is my command, Mahatmaji. I will bring you one lakh within thirty days.'

From that moment onwards, Datta's mind dwelt completely on Chandulal and the one lakh that he would soon be bringing. At every aarti he searched for Chandulal's corpulent figure in the crowd. Days continued to pass but Chandulal failed to present himself. Perhaps he is caught up in his work, perhaps he will come tomorrow, perhaps he has fallen sick—Datta consoled himself with all kinds of thoughts. Though rankled by Chandulal's absence, he was not overtly concerned, having convinced himself that Chandulal would bring one lakh rupees at the end of one month.

A month passed; there was still no sign of Chandulal and now Datta started becoming worried. Had he been defrauded of his 50,000 rupees? The question descended on him like an incubus. He tried to convince himself that Chandulal was an honest man and would soon return with one lakh rupees, but he could hardly stop myriad questions from racking his mind.

Why had Chandulal disappeared from this area since the day he received the money? Was the sum of 50,000 enough to turn him into a thief? He cursed himself for not taking Chandulal's address before entrusting him with his life's savings. He inquired about him from some of the villagers but no one knew about his whereabouts. There was little he could do except wait.

When another month passed and Chandulal didn't appear, Datta could no longer deny to himself, the fact, that he had been duped. The wealth that he had amassed by masquerading as a Mahatma for so many years had slipped out of his hands. His dream of a happily married life in Bombay was shattered. Struck by a pall of gloom, he stopped taking food and was soon bedridden with weakness. The flabbergasted villagers had no idea what malaise had struck their Mahatma. They prayed for his long life at the temple and beseeched him to begin eating again.

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But Datta remained inconsolable. The loss of his fortune had broken his spirit, now he had no desire to live.

A week passed. He lay on the bed desolate and dazed. Then the miracle happened.

Though he was very weak, he managed to rise on his feet and shuffle inside the temple. Villagers who were sitting near his bed were surprised to see him get up. Wordlessly they followed him. In front of all the villagers Datta extricated the urn from its hiding place. Much of its contents already depleted when 50000 were handed over to Chandulal, the urn now only contained a few loose coins and the necklace.

Datta placed the coins and the necklace in front of Ganpati's idol and prostrating himself he whispered, 'Ganpati, today I have realized what a sin stealing is. I thank you for sending Chandulal in my life. He has made me see the truth. Datta the scavenger has now ceased to exist; the man who lies at your feet is your humble devotee.'

Then he got up and looking at the villagers around him he said, 'this is a very valuable necklace. It has the power to turn a scavenger into a Mahatma.' The villagers hardly understood what he meant by those words, but they were satisfied that their Mahatma was back to normal. Datta allowed the villagers to feed him and with a filled stomach he lay down on the bed.

Next day he conducted *aarti* after a gap of one week. When the *aarti* was over and few villagers wanted to present him with small coins, as they usually did, he stopped them, saying, "I implore all of you to stop making monetary contributions."

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The Oldster's School

Apurba Kumar Saikia

The sun had been a bit out of sorts. Under the lukewarm wintry sunlight Hareshwari had tucked the comb as a loom-reed in her hair which cascaded down to her knees.

"So you're sunning yourself, are you?"

With the skimpiest of clothing in the name of a dress, the old Manohar cried at Hareshwari from the gateway. One couldn't really do without a response in such a situation, and in reality, there was no need for an actual identity of the caller—! In utter heedlessness Barua, in lieu of Hareshwari, answered, "Oh, how the hell can you think of the sun—what an outrage of the untimely clouds!"

Suddenly it struck Barua—the outrage was not singly caused by a few patches of clouds overhead. It had also to do with the old man's sexless nudity. At such moments Barua couldn't help getting a bit restless. The morning was yet to attain its severity. Not to speak of heading for the quagmire along the cattle-path, the old man today was almost at the hour of reaching town. At least Barua didn't want his wife, Hareshwari to cast her pitiful glance at a scanty masculine physique in broad daylight. Perhaps it was better for certain things to remain hidden quietly amidst possibilities.

Old Manohar had descended upon the earth fifteen years before Barua did. By this calculation the people of that locality considered Manohar to be fifteen years elder to Barua. But during the period when Barua had passed his middle-age blues and was suffering from colour-blindness, the 'oldster' was well off as a gardener of multi-hued flowers. Sesame flowers, pulse flowers and mustard flowers. As the fields solely required a pair of bullocks with a plough, and at best, a naked man, the old man had gradually begun to minimize his clothings; but as if to compensate for this, his blabberings tended to swell by slow degrees.

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The other day the oldster asked Barua, "Do you know why the cat shuts its eyes while licking milk?"

He didn't. Barua had no idea about t; perhaps, Manohar too didn't. The man had this grave fault—he would perplex a listener, someone who was ensnared in his web like a spotted insect in a spider's salivary mesh, with a ridiculous question, make him restless for the answer, but would surprisingly keep himself aloof from breaking the conundrum. How irresponsible! However, the fault of irresponsibility was not the old man's alone. The world has been made to sway eternally with infinite clueless questions by the Lord Himself. The Lord who "When addressed aloud never responds."

However delicious the food may be, Barua would never touch it with his eyes shut consciously. During dinner, if the electricity were to fail, he would usually sit still like a statue with the food only partially consumed. Hareswari would appear in between with a lantern lit. Hareswari worked fast on the lantern lost insects or dirt settled upon the food. Barua might pretend not to be bothered by swallowing an insect, but he too was in no way inclined to swallow an insect in artificial darkness while savouring any delicacy. Then, after having attained the life of a human being through the process of evolution, and having had to trudge a great distance along the winding path, who knows where he could have dropped this feline propensity!

Barua felt quite amused at not having actuary tested anything in the name of delicacies for a number of years at a stretch. He hadn't had the taste of any kind of food for years together so as to eat with the voracity of a young she-goat devouring tender grass sprouting from the sediments of a baled out pond during July or August. What amazing enchantment of the hands! Within a twinkling of the eye what had she added to the steaming curry—maybe some half-ripened date-plums, some coriander leaves—the curry turned out to be nectar. Possibly this nectar had enabled the woman, Barua's mother, to continue to live for about a century—not sluggishly but with a tumultuous, meaningful presence. Now and then he doubted—could the weight of his steps quake the wall-clock? As he suddenly opened the gate after reaching home, had his wife got busy again after her siesta in the bedroom at the end of her daily chores anticipating his arrival?

With his life's savings he had not only covered expenses like his children's wedding but also managed to procure a plot of land in the outskirts of the town and construct a house. At the end of a tug-of-war between his desires and his financial resources, he had finally erected a six-roomed matchbox-shaped house, with everyone agreeing. Barua regarded this area

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of his as the edge of a patch of ringworm, the most active region. Like the ringworm, if the town were to expand, it would have to stretch peripherally across these areas. To extend it up perpendicularly, the necessary financial support of the inhabitants was not available. The town, too, was developing in an unplanned manner—like a woman accumulating fat after the cessation of menstruation. The town was shaping up like Hareswari's gradual deformation from the lack of will, lack of competition in drawing attention of the greenness of Barua's mind and lack of a little concentration on activities. Occasionally Barua felt the urge to survey the town from one end to the other on a chopper, did his house look like a beauty-spot on the face of the town or like a vermilion mark on its forehead? Of course, Barua knew that it was impossible to have such a glimpse of the houses from an altitude of two kilometres. But Barua, who never had any experience of air-travel, didn't have any problem at luxuriating in varied poetic fancies. Such is the advantage of being ignorant.

Why, can't a cat stand the glare of the whiteness of milk? But can there be any glare in whiteness? They say white is not even an original colour. The whiteness of the widow's apparel is said to be the embellishment of about seven unified colours—adorned by the length of edgeless emptiness and woof of purity; how can such a colour affect a cat in any way? What does the white colour stimulate in Barua's mind? He didn't hold the hue of his body in any high esteem, after all. He indulged in such fickle thoughts with a great deal of an inferiority complex. People in the neighborhood considered the colour of Barua's skin to be greyish brown. A few of them tried to inspire the feelings of Barua in the tone of a monastery's devotee that it was of Lord Krishna's hue. Barua regarded this to be a sort of masked Indian apartheid which shuffled within the current of the subconscious. Though he exhibited his exhalted mental make-up by remaining aloof from such discussions, he had, incidentally married Hareshwari at the prime of his youth only on the singular weightage of the colour of her skin. "Okay, you people go ahead in looking for a suitable bride for me. But see to it that whatever virtues she may be endowed with, the colour of her skin has to be fair. That's vital, mind it." There being no dearth of fair-skinned girls in the country, Barua easily found one to negotiate with. The fair colour of Hareshwari's skin lowered the demands for her educational qualification; her inability to weave, plait or knit became inconsequential and the new bride, with her ego and vanity up considerably, kept Barua vexed continually for the first couple of years. Slowly when the couple began to comprehend the futility of many things and set their feet on earth like a dozen other couples, Barua had become the father of a girl-child.

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Or had the white cat, while licking the milk which was of the same colour as its body, closed its eyes only because it didn't have the slightest weakness or interest for it? If the greyish-brown colour didn't arouse any sensation for colours, Barua, too, perhaps, wouldn't have had any weakness for the white colour. But old Manohar had never referred to the creature as a white cat. Or had it been pre-assumed that cats are generally white? Or was the cat immersed in its quest for some coloured drink within the rnilk with its eyes shut?

Barua's anger gradually began to mount with old Manohar in his head. In the meantime, the oldster must have been soaring in outer space under the intoxicating spell of hemp at the old Kondura's place. He had surely entered into some controversial circuit with Kondura as to how the tale of Sita and the crow, struck by the arrows of Cupid, could have entered the *Krittivashi Ramayana*. As the discussion rose towards the climax, Kondura's wife would arrive and shatter the tempo with her complaint that there was not a thing in the house for preparing lunch except for some pot-herbs and arums. And with a mild indictment over Kondura for spoiling the atmosphere, there would be Manohar unsteadily emerging from Kondura's dwelling with folded eyelids and a floating head.

Though he generally kept lashing at the old man, Barua, at heart, nurtured an inexpressible form of envy as well as attraction for Manohar. Manohar's presence was akin to a mosquito's something that couldn't be ignored, an irritating drone near the ears though shorn of the propensity for violence. Barua's envy for the hemp-addicted Manohar was proportionately more. It was not that Barua too had never fancied of being secluded indoors in idleness at midday sharing a pipe of hemp with an intimate friend. How would it be to have a long pull at the intoxicating pipe? It couldn't be dull anyhow. Would it be right to impose any prohibition over edibles at this age? After all, Barua wouldn't go to the extent of losing his sanity and enter into a rhythm-less dancing spree on the street under its influence. Still for some unknown reason Barua used to be abashed and his nose, generally considered by others to be the centre of shame, was heavily pressed down by some over-enveloping force. The whole process had been delayed, the period of getting over his shamefulness was long over. He didn't feel it proper to rue over the fact that he had not grown impudent at the right time. And ought the importance of the nose end with its function of breathing? Which part of the human body has been initially mentioned in the Bible? Isn't it the nose? Anyway, what was the face of Manohar like a few moments before he was sharing the pipe of hemp with Kondura? Immersed in

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gratification, words must have poured out of the mouth uninterruptedly with the head in a weightless state seeking to take off for a flight, the eyes reddened to some extent with one of them appearing to be partially closed; closed? Like the cat's licking milk? Barua was jolted.

No it couldn't be; Barua grew obdurate. There couldn't be any relation between the eyes of the cat and those of a hemp-addict. The closed eyes of a cat presented a plain engrossed bearing—the closed eyes of the old man influenced by hemp couldn't have the mark of that innocence.

However, what was Barua's notion of a bowl of milk? It had been years since he had last tasted milk fresh and undiluted. Barua now knew quite well about the accurate spoonfuls of powdered milk and tea-leaf in a cup of water for a perfect cup of tea. As a matter of fact, Barua had drunk huge quantities of goat-milk during his early years. They had quite a large pen behind their house for about half a dozen goats. Their mother used to pour a bowl of hot milk over the paste-like over-boiled rice. For their meals they had to be content with the 'Bora' variety of rice with goat's milk. Barua was still unsure whether the food they devoured day and night were actually light repasts or meals. In the name of meat they had monitor lizards and after long intervals they ate the brains of goat's heads their father bought cheaply from the butcher. It had the colour of goat's milk mixed with a slight treacle. It had been nothing strange to find the young Barua holding a beet in his hand and asking the green-grocer what it was. Even when he had passed his middle age, he was yet to be acquainted with most of the superior varieties of fish as well as the common insignificant ones smeared with mud in the village pools. Hareshwari flinched at the sight of the 'Mirika' variety. Barua still had that day in mind when he had to swallow silently all the nasty rebukes in her book for bringing home a few of them mistaking them to be carps. Perhaps cats didn't differentiate between superior and inferior varieties of fish. The milk-loving cat could be fond of fish no matter to whatever variety it belonged. Now the important thing was whether the cat shut its eyes or not while feasting on a fish, and if it did, won't the entire foundation of this question be jolted to a staggering stand?

Barua grew restless. Hareshwari couldn't bring about his composure even after offering him three cups of red tea after every thirty minutes. Old Manohar thrust Barua into such uneasiness with the question as a three-year old child putting the easy clue-less question before his father about the mystery of birth.

"Well, have you already forgotten that your father used to sit yawning and hiccupping right at the middle of the day under the influence of opium?" Barua roared in anger. Meaningless words of self-satisfaction.

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Still his head grew lighter after letting out a piece of his mind. And there sat the numb Hareshwari on a stool while her grand-daughter, Aishani plucked her grey hair. It looked certain that if this manner of plucking continued in the manner of plucking seedlings, Hareshwari's head would appear like moth-eaten in no time. Barua couldn't understand the harm caused to someone by the conspicuous grey hair on the head. However, as some thoughtless accusation, he held the grey hair solely responsible for the itching on Mrs. Barua's head and took the necessary measures accordingly. He had an inexpressible feeling of repulsion if he caught sight of Hareshwari scratching her head wildly. This feeling clashed against his attraction for the pleasant smell of Hareshwari's hair during their early years. Even now Barua heard it being said in some places that in this life the very idea of time-tested concepts as love, attachment, mercy were farcical. Then what is this called—the tremendous mutual attraction for a few years after marriage? This is supposed to be a hormone-related scent emanating from the female physique. Perhaps Barua had caught this smell in Hareshwari's hair and was thereby attracted to it. If the chemistry of the female body could have been transformed, may be the whole business of love would have undergone a change. Then Barua possibly wouldn't have had to watch Hareshwari scratch her hair with such obnoxiousness. He had grown passing the greater half of his early life with a half-filled tummy—still he assessed that he hadn't been stricken by poverty at that time, rather he had relished it. Pole cats, monitory and sparrows constituted the delicacies in that poverty. Barua's father was penniless not for the dearth of money or food, but for his renunciation of material pleasures. Barua had now come to know that a central office of hunger was located inside the head; if this office could be locked with a non-cooperation programme, hunger would disappear from this earth. As a result there would be no necessity for Barua to perform the minimum works that he was doing now. Nevertheless, old Manohar would still continue to work. His physical labour being totally dissociated from hunger, it would go on undeterred at its own graceful pace. Setting aside his own hot pan of molasses he would leave no stone unturned in search of dry plantain ribs, bamboo leaves and twigs for his neighbour who would need them as firewood under the pan of steaming pulses. Manohar took a leading role in cremations often holding one corner of the bier of some dead person with whom he had never come across earlier. Who else would prepare plates from plantain sheaths for serving curd and parched rice to two hundred invitees at the *Shraddha* ceremony of some Shatolani, the deceased old woman of the adjacent village! Why did one need to solicit the assistance of others when Manohar was there?

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Only six hours were left for the 'bhaona' to begin—the "namghar" of Palashani village was bustling with activity since early morning—Mangala Gayan Bora was tossing about on his bed—his piles had relasped—a sudden crisis had developed for a vocalist—but what was there to panic about, someone simply had to go to Manohar and bring him. The voice of the old man who had quite begun to play the 'khol' regularly couldn't betray its original resonance, could it? Twigs and branches of trees had been stuck near the bridge across some deeper portion of the Kolong. Varieties of fish especially the 'Baralis', the 'Dhekeras' and the 'Sols' had set up their habitats there. The season of catching fish was almost past—no advance was made due to the non-arrival of the visiting fishermen—with an average of five per household from a hundred and ten families in the village, there was not a single man who could claim to be an expert in this technique of catching fish. Someone impulsively led a group of youths with a pair of fishing-nets and a dozen baskets to try his hand—someone took a plunge into the waters of the Kolong, remained underneath for a couple of minutes and emerged again. He was none other than Manohar with a 'Barali' fish in his hand.

Hareshwari opened her mouth wide as the 'Barali'. A fly was hovering over the threshold of the mouth undecided whether to enter or not. Hareshwari was perhaps feeling greatly relieved after some of her grey hair were plucked. A red carpet had been laid over the path of her slumber. Within a few seconds her nose would probably begin to snore. Barua was quite amazed to find her immersed in slumber in no time after long hours of deep sleep. Over these few days, slumber, on the other hand, had been behaving with Barua as if it were a love-sunk hosteller visiting her village home during the summer vacation. The doctors, too, knew that it would be difficult for the man to derive his slumber effortlessly after spending the whole day upon the rocking chair or the stool. After all, not allowing even those portions like "Agent wanted' to escape his view from four dailies in this posture was quite like an extended form of slumber. Oh! nothing could be worse—the greater half of his existence had been spent in dealing with stuff relating to files; the lifeless letters of the files had snatched away more of Barua's attention than his neighbours. But now after his retirement from service, he was overawed by the lifestyle of his neighbours. He couldn't avoid a good rapport with these people in any away, but at the same time, he was unacquainted with any smooth means by which he could assimilate or establish a cordial relation with them. Everything didn't reach his heart through the path of his eyes, it took an exhausting turn across his brains.

By the way, was there any psychological relation between the cat with

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its eyes shut and the ostrich burying its head in the sands? A misfortune of the system of creating a foe-less atmosphere? Barua resorted to such tactics whenever he faced some horrific creature in his dreams. Whenever a double-headed, four-eyed creature charged at him, Barua, too, closed his eyes in his dreams and waited till the danger swept past him. It was a semi-matured futile exercise, yet so necessary. Even now, if he came across some gruesome spilling of blood along his way, he reacted in this childlike avoidance. Earlier on, when Barua and his young wife, Hareshwari, attired attractively, moved on a rickshaw, such an avoidance was necessary. He felt uneasy, wondering if the tall and sturdy ruffians strutting along the street ogled at his wife's creamy cheeks, and he intentionally pretended to be short-sighted. Hareshwari often fell a victim to Barua's excessive perceptibility. Barua was of the view that if those things were to be re-examined, enough material would surface for a fierce quarrel between the two in some lengthy duel of medium intensity rather than passing his time yawning and hiccupping in this way. It had been quite some time since Barua had seen tears in Hareshwari's eyes. On noticing her eyes moistened a few days ago, he had approached her with utmost tenderness, but he found that it was only an eye infection that had caused her tears to trickle out. There was no emotional attachment in those tears. A cold oculist had treated her with an ointment. Of late, Barua was developing an inner urge to touch a couple of Hareshwari's tear drops with his index finger.

The townsfolk, plants and trees, birds and animals—everything had undergone a change. The place had begun to assume the traits of a modern township. At the other side of the bridge stood their ancestral home; one of his brothers, a cultivator, lived there. Barua visited his brother occasionally, kept in touch with him and during the time of harvest, he collected his share of crops in huge sacks. This relieved him of his expenditure on those items for almost half the year. Barua was sometimes confused pondering whether it was the crops that kept his relation alive with his brother or was it his relation with his brother that enabled him to collect the crops. Even after thirty years of their father's demise, Barua hadn't shown any concern over the registration of his share of paternal property to his name. He let it remain as it was. His contact with the younger generation was also confined to a certain limit only. These days nobody bothered to come forward on his own and get introduced or exchange pleasantries. Being senior, Barua should have taken the initiative, but without any particular reason the inclination for such relationships wasn't there in him. Thus, it continued in that manner like the extension of the horizon with the ascent of the viewer—along with his age, the

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fissure of Barua's relation with his milieu too continued to widen. On Holi, Barua was seated on the verandah of his brother's house inviting the coloured dangers, but not a single youngster came to him for smearing coloured powder on his face. He hadn't even been able to tuck the end of his dhoti behind him properly while appearing before the people at their village home during the 'Shraddha' ceremony of their father. Hareshwari, too, was none the less worse on her part. When they gathered at their ancestral home during different religious ceremonies and genuflected before the people for blessings, only their sister-in-law, Himmala, could maintain the beginning and ending lines of the 'ghosha' audibly. During the intermittent period of the 'ghosha' presented in chorus, both Barua and Hareshwari simply murmured some incomprehensible words meaninglessly and paid their respects to the congregation as well as the departed soul.

For all this, Barua didn't accuse anyone now. While advancing along the journey of life, developing intimacies with everyone beside the long road was hardly possible, and so he tried to maintain only those relationships that he couldn't do without. But this handful of relationships wasn't enough for a long, retired life. Barua now needed to be encircled by a good number of close associates. And Barua felt that in the list of his possible near and dear ones, old Manohar deserved a place.

But where had the man suddenly melted away to? Though there had been a nagging pain in Barua's waist since a fortnight, he jumped up from his deck-chair and came out to the courtyard. He felt the need to meet this man right at that moment; he had a lot to learn from the school of the illiterate old man. Being heedless to returns, being able to perceive the heart-felt inclination to love all, from the alms-seekers to the life-savers, could be the adequate qualification for admission into the old man's school.

Immediately after crossing the bridge, the lonely path proceeded alongside the Kolong towards the abandoned homestead. There was the Hahila lake beside it. The migratory birds had come to the lake. Someone from the village mentioned about Manohar's frequent visits for bird-watching and heart-contented giggling. During these days the old man always grew over-enthusiastic. He would scatter the grains of rice from the bag that he brought along to attract the flocks of birds—the familiar as well as the unacquainted—near him. The birds were unfamiliar with the human form and so didn't come too close to the old man. However, Manohar didn't mind this at all. The oldster didn't belong to that class of men who attached undue importance to physical proximity.

Barua advanced slowly along the Kolong with measured steps lest

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he slipped. It was an unfamiliar, slippery path. He slowly entered this abandonment after fifty long years with a second childhood and emerged after some time; with an unnatural feeling of gratification he stood watching the silvery reflection of the Hahila lake far away without batting an eyelid; it was said that the haunted Hahila claimed an individual each year. One Bharam from their village was swallowed by the lake the year before. Bharam was in the throes of pulmonary consumption, yet ho too wasn't spared. How would it be if it were Barua's turn this time? Wouldn't it be a seventh heaven to pass his time in fun and frolic with the Hahila mermaids? How fortunate it would be for him to be the protagonist of a sensational drama of death! But where the hell was the old man, Manohar?

A little distance away were herds of cattle, a few goats interspered in between, water hyacinths and figs along the bank of the Hahila lake. There! A snake's head had popped up from the waters to have a look at Barua; a precipice stood ahead on the other side of the cattle-path. There! The heron had just had something nutritious from the wound at the back of the neck of the cow grazing nearby.

A little beyond, at a quiet spot beneath a tree someone was snoring away to glory. There was nothing much in the name of clothings. Like the Goddess Kali standing upon Lord Shiva, an old she-goat stood in an aggressive posture over him. Barua saw old Manohar as the hero of a novel, lying indisposed at full length, his chest heaving up and down with the inhaling and exhaling of breath. The old she-goat continued to lick him from one side, pricking the old man with her beard. Now as her tongue ascended onto his lips, she began to lick the old man's cheeks.

Barua noticed in sheer amazement that though the old man was lying motionless with his eyes shut, he was not fully asleep for, in the middle of it, he had driven off some mosquito or fly from his belly with his hand.

What an enchanting scene it was—now Barua had no question for old Manohar. For merely a simple answer, Barua couldn't in any way cause an interruption to such a scene. Instead he would spend as much time as he could in luxuriating upon such a wonderful scene to his heart's content.

Barua sat at the edge of the cattle-path in anticipation of the normal composure of old Manohar.

Translated from Assamese by Krishna Dulal Barua ❑

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Wilderness

Bhagwan Dass Morwal

It took him some time to recognize the *chowkidaar* posted at the gate. Despite nearing sixty, there wasn't an iota of slackness on that face. But for the whiteness of his hair, none would even bother to notice his age.

S.P Mehta, J.P Mehta & Niranjan Mehta—he carefully read the names engraved on the black granite plaque on the right flank of that imposing building, 'Mehta Kutir'. Once again matching the names on the paper trembling in his fingers with the ones engraved on the plaque, he surmised: S.P. can only be Satyaprakash and J.P., Jaiprakash. The *chowkidaar's* demeanor and the names—both seemed to confirm that he had reached the right place.

But before he could put that piece of paper back in his pocket and ring the bell, he was 'welcomed' by a 'black-dog-of-foreign-breed'. He fell back a yard. Noticing this display of loyalty for its masters - manifest in the canine's eagerness to 'attack-a-stranger-at-sight'- the newcomer was awestruck. Should someone let this beast loose on him in the open ... the very thought made him shiver. Before he could fill in the details of this horrid fantasy further, the *chowkidaar*, partially coming out of the gate made of thick iron bars, intervened, 'Yes.. .please...?'

'You ...ooo'

'Yes...'

'You are *dada* Bisnath, aren't you?' instead of answering, the newcomer enquired.

The unblinking eyes behind the gate-bars livened up. Bisnath, who had virtually got lost in the oft heard sound of *'kaka'* ever since he had come here, was rejuvenated by this address of *'dada'*. Over the years the word *'kaka'* had reduced him into a mere domestic servant – it was an empty cliche for his masters (not older than his sons) and their

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children. The word had sapped the sanctity of the countryside relationships. He was really exasperated, when the children of 'Mehta Kutir' sometimes beckoned him, a man of their grandfather's age, plainly as Bisnath.

'Well, I'm Bisnath ... but who are you... calling me *dada*?' Stretching the limits of his memory Bisnath opened the gate a little wider.

'Didn't you recognize me *dada*?'

'Your dialect makes you familiar, almost a kin...but son, at my age...'

'I'm Islamuddin's son, Javed.'

'Islamuddin?'

'Islamuddin; that is Mangal Khan's grandson!' the stranger revealed his identity.

'Bhale aadmi!' Then simply say that you are Mangal Khan's grandson; come, do get in!' saying this Bisnath opened wide the till now half-open gate.

Watching the stranger enter the gate, the dog almost went mad. Barking ferociously it snapped at its chain. Saliva trickled down its mouth. Two sharp teeth that protruded from its mouth flashed like a sword.

'Hold on Michael, have some sense to differentiate between an insider and an outsider.'

At Bisnath's reproach Michael, the 'canine-of-foreign-breed,' calmed down. It was only with some effort that Javed could recompose himself but throughout, his eyes remained fixed on this guard-of-foreign-breed that would growl intermittently—whenever it happened to see him.

Dada Bisnath...pardon...Bisnath *kaka*, for that was how everyone addressed him now-a-days, ushered Javed in the guard-cabin by the gate. Handing Javed a glass of water, he asked him that oft-asked question which has been put to every newcomer since ages, 'Now tell me son —is everything all right in the village?'

'Yes *dada*, everything is fine there, but you seem to have forgotten it.'

'What to do? This heart yearns ... but all links with the village were cut-off when my son and daughter-in-law left it to settle here. Whatsoever little remained was done in by this government when it took away my 'vote'. So long as it was there, I had something intact in the village.'

'Dada, it was not the government but our own people who had 'it' struck off the voters' list. Ours is no more a village of yore. It is a wilderness where no one relishes seeing the other.'

'Be it as the people wish! By the way our-village must have changed a lot by now?'

'Right *dada*, much has changed. A *Shiv-mandir* has come up on the vacant land near the pond. There are more than half a dozen mosques

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in the village now in place of the three earlier. Ratiram's son seems to have hit the jackpot after having been elected *sarpanch* in the last election. Has got two telephones installed. Got a video machine installed too in his house ... and to cap it all, for ticket, he, with his VCP, even arranges night shows on his colour TV for the children of the entire neighbourhood.'

The news of his village's progress seemed to induce a 'sparkle-of-dawn' in Bisnath's eyes.

'Parbhati Panwari has taken the agency for Coca-Cola and Pepsi.'

'It means it is no more a village but a city.'

'Yes, you may say so. Now, even a police post has been established there.'

'Then it is a full-fledged city. Instead of looking to the panch for amicable settlement of the quarrels, everybody must be approaching police-judiciary, nowadays,' talking aloud to him-self indulgently, Bisnath queried Javed.

'It has become an everyday occurrence. Even 'kitchen-quarrels' are taken to the police station. *Dada*, I forgot to mention a real piece of news.'

'Real news?'

'Yes, real news. Know Paras Jain? His son Mahabir Jain has got the contract for the arrack-vend.'

'Javed-son, this is real news. At least now the people won't die of hooch.' Suddenly Bisnath found himself descending down a ravine of the past.

It was only a month after he had arrived at 'Mehta Kutir' that one morning *Manjhale Bauji*, spreading the newspaper in front of him, had informed, *'Kaka*, did you see this news? Ten *harijans* have died in your village of hooch.'

Bisnath was floored by the news. Had it been some other news he would have corrected *Manjhale Bauji:* 'The village is not just mine but yours too. You also have roots there.' But he couldn't stop and correct him. It was far more urgent to know the identity of the ten who had died.

Bisnath was overwhelmed with grief. Only if he could wing his way to his village!

'How will Shankar's mother survive the death of her young and only son? How would Kaushalya negotiate the mountainous ruggedness of life, clutching to her infant daughters for support? How would Rampati arrange for the marriage of her daughter? There was none whom Bisnath didn't recollect. Though he hadn't burst out in full-throated wail, he was deeply perturbed. The weeping and wailing, and the pathetic scenes of

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the family members mourning their dead sledge-hammered his heart and brain. His eyes brimmed with tears.

'*Kaka*, today, the name of *your* village is emblazoned in bold. Today I will tell my friends that we too had once lived in this village.'

Bisnath cast a side-glance at his *Manjhale Bauji*. It surprised him that instead of submerging *Manjhale Bauji* in grief akin to his, the news had, in fact, whetted his excitement. Why should *Manjhale Bauiji* grieve over this tragedy?—pondered Bisnath silently. Apart from the fact that his grandfather the late Deendayal Mehta along with his family—having been blown apart like straws in wind—had once settled down here as a Partition refugee, what other bond does *Manjhale Bauji* have with this village? What if his father had refused to come to this '*kutir*' despite the passionate pleas of his son to the effect? And what if till his death he had stayed in that house, which, despite having been bought by Mangal Khan's sons years ago, was still known as Dina-refugee's *haveli*?

Visiting his village after a fortnight Bisnath had watched, for the first and the only time, his state's chief minister from such a close proximity. Neither to inaugurate or lay the foundation stone of a hospital, school, road, or a bridge nor to unveil the statue of a freedom fighter, but apparently to console the distraught families and be with them in their grief. But in reality he was there to scotch the opposition's uproar over this issue in the assembly.

Bisnath had noticed that the villagers, finding the VIPs in their midst in their own village, were in a state of bliss. The flash-lights emanating from correspondent's cameras coupled with the show of earnestness displayed by cameramen belonging to the *Doordarshan Kendra* had created an eerie but unforgettable mix of surprise and sensation. Everyone had been trying hard to push closer to the CM and his ministers, so as to be within the camera frame.

There was a steep demand for newspapers in the village the next day; many were at a loss to understand this effervescence of literacy overnight. At news-time, the homes where black and white televisions had made a recent entry were faced with a houseful situation. A mad rush, similar to one during the telecast of either *Chitrahaar* or the Hindi feature-film on Sundays, prevailed. Everyone was eager to spot one's face in the company of the chief-minister or at least his ministerial colleagues. And those whose faces could be spotted on the TV screen had remained at the centre of the village gossip for days.

During that period Bisnath's village was singularly lucky for having become the toast of the entire province. For weeks its photographs were prominently displayed in the newspapers. For villagers around, Bisnath's

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village had become a reference point; they would first allude to it before mentioning their own village. Now a liquor-vend had opened in that very village. And it was Mahavir Jain—the only son of that Paras Jain who would never eat a grain of food after sunset—who had grabbed this liquor contract. Bisnath's village has truly become a city!

'But *dada*, the liquor-vend has destroyed the whole village. Everyone flocks towards it in the evening. Even the teenagers are seen heading towards it surreptitiously. It has become difficult for daughters and daughters-in-law of the village to pass by after dusk.'

It was new information for Bisnath.

Presently a car honked on the road outside. Hearing it Bisnath went out to open the gate saying, 'It seems to be *Barre Bauji.*' Bisnath recognizes the sounds of his masters' cars now.

For a moment Javed thought that instead of arriving at Deendayal Mehta's sons, who having uprooted themselves from the village had come to this city, he had come to a wrong place. And that S.P., that is Satyapraksh – once Satte for Bisnath *dada* — has got metamorphosed into *'Bauji'*.

Collecting the lunch box, briefcase and magazines from the car, Bisnath towed *Barre Bauji* alias S.P Mehta. The saying that 'nothing that escaped master's eyes' was reiterated anew for Bisnath that day. Before he could abide by the *dharma* behoving a servant, the master himself queried: *'Kaka,* who is there in the cabin?'

'Bauji, it is Javed.'

'Javed?'

'Yes *Bauji,* from our village'.

'From the village?' *Barre Bauji's* forehead knitted into a frown.

'Remember our Mangal Khan ... the one whose sons had bought your village-house; his grandson.'

'Achha, achha...his grandson. Why is he here?'

'Must have come for a job...what else,' *Barre Bauji's* wife butted in before Bisnath could say something. She had probably overheard the master-servant exchange.

'Kanta, you are ever so absurd.'

'Yes *Mem Saab,* it is not necessary that whosoever comes to *Bauji* from the village comes only for a job.'

'Come on! Would a villager stroll into the city for a picnic? God knows what debt our *Bauji* owe to that village that he has not been able to pay it off even after his death. Everyone seems to head towards Mehta *kutir* as if it were a *Gurudwara.*'

Bisnath found it difficult to stay on. How to convince this-Mem-Saab-of-his of the obligations her late father-in-law owed to this village and Javed's grandfather?

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'Mem Saab, don't you know that his grandfather – Mangal Khan – was a sepoy in Netaji's army,' Bisnath divulged, barely controlling his emotions.

Netaji's *sepoy...sepoy* of which party's *neta*? There was a sparkle in *Mem Saab's* eyes: *'Kaka,* if his grandfather has been a security personnel to a leader of our party, then our task is almost accomplished. If it is so, be sure of my name being on the panel for vice-presidentship of State Women's Front this time around.'

Mem Saab's husband, S.P. Mehta-alias-Barre *Bauji* was aghast. He couldn't even laugh. Bisnath too was irritated by the stupidity of his *Mem Saab* who, in the very beginning, had scolded him for calling her *'Babu'*. *'Mem Saab'* as a mode of address was not an outcome of Bisnath's choice or volition but was deliberately imposed on him by S.P. Mehta's-alias-*Barre-Bauji's*-wife.

'Kanta, sometimes do try to think beyond this too. With this kind of general knowledge, what to talk of vice-president, you would even be sacked from the presidentship of the district's youth wing. *Kaka* is talking about Netaji Subhash Chander Bose of *Azad Hind Fauj*-fame and not about these petty politicians of yours.'

'Yes, *Mem Saab,* I am referring to Netaji whose army had driven British out of the country. The stones of the Red Fort are witness to this fact. Mangal Khan, Javed's very own grandfather, was among the braves interned at the Red Fort.' Bisnath was puffed up with pride.

'Kaka, aren't you talking about the Red-Fort trial?'

'Bauji, you are right.'

'So he was a comrade of General Shahnawaj Khan, General Dhillon and Colonel Sehgal?'

It was for the first time that Bisnath had seen a twinkle of self-respect in the eyes of a family member inhabiting the marbled-walls of 'Mehta kutir.'

'Mem Saab, it was only Mangal Khan whom *Sethji* used to respect in the whole village. I myself have heard *Sethji* often repeat the tale wherein Mangal Khan had stood bravely alongside Netaji in Rangoon amidst cannon fire.' Bisnath had always addressed his *Bauji* 's father, Deendayal Mehta as *Sethji.*

'Kaka, I mistook him to be a bodyguard of some leader-*sheader.* Anyway, take Michael to doctor Chatterjee's clinic tomorrow. I have already spoken to him on the phone. I wonder why it is so lethargic these days, *Mem Saab,* that is the future president of State Women's Front and the present president of district's youth wing, Shrimati Kanta Mehta ordered Bisnath, abruptly changing the topic—otherwise, who knows for how

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long, in the pretext of *Netaji*, she would have been quizzed, especially on her knowledge of history.

Bisnath picked up his *Mem Saab's* hint. He knows his limits. It does not behove a servant to be in the presence of the masters for long. On his way back Bisnath keeps pondering over his masters' indifference to their past. Why do they get irritated whenever he stirs up the chords of memory? Their irritation is especially accentuated when someone incidentally drops in from the village. The strands of the past seemed to unwind slowly...

The same old scene—almost dusty and soiled.

A small family in the village...looking for shelter. A mother, haunted by fear, tightly holding her two infants to her bosom. Witnesses to a horrendous cruelty of rioters murdering two of her brothers. The anxiety about the honour of the adolescent daughter. And the horror on discovering that the village to which they had been sent for shelter belonged to those from whom they had recently escaped almost by the skin of the teeth.

When the local women tried to hold the infants clinging to the bosom of their mother, the fear, which had chased her from across the boundary, did not let her part with them. Even the adolescent girl clung to her mother. Everyone tried to reason out with the family that there was no truth in whatever they were imagining. They had assured, "We have as many Hindus here as those whose victims you have been across the border."

How to assuage their fear? Every one tried hard to persuade them.

Overwhelmed, the head of the household at last spoke to his wife: 'Satte's mother, having managed to escape alive from there somehow where do we go now? If God wills us to die here, then let that be.'

Satte's mother or the arms that wrapped the infants to the bosom relaxed. They were allotted a room in the village *dharamshala* with an assurance that they could comfortably stay there till some permanent arrangement was made. And within no time all household necessities started pouring in the *dharamshala*. Flour-lentil-rice-vegetables-mustard oil, two fresh pitchers—everyone chipped in according to one's means. Two-three cots were sent down from Mangal Khan's *baithak* too.

In no time the desolate family seemed content.

But one day the villagers noticed that this family was preparing to leave for somewhere else. Everyone was startled: Has the village been found wanting in its duty or has someone misbehaved with these women? The news also reached Mangal Khan. He came running to the *dharmshala* and on enquiring only ended up agreeing with the head of the household.

'Dina, what you say is right. How long can one survive on doles?'

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Mangal Khan tried to persuade him nevertheless, but to no avail. But in the end it was only he who could offer a ray of hope: 'Dina, may I say something, would you mind if I gave you five *bighas* from my land?' Mangal Khan looked at Dina and other family members simultaneously. Dina, i.e., the head of the family didn't utter a word. Only his lusterless, vacuous eyes responded.

'All right, no need to go anywhere then. Be comfortable in this village.'

The household was once again back on the rails. Henceforth there was no looking back for Dina. No villager took note when Dina-refugee, who would sell aluminum, copper and brass utensils from village to village, stopped selling utensils and became Deendayal Mehta. No one even noticed when Deendayal Mehta started lending hundreds of rupees on interest to labourers and farmers and came to be addressed as *'Sethji'*. Bisnath too, who for years had addressed him as Dina, didn't realize when the man had turned into a *Sethji* even for him. Hearsay has it that the very foundation of Mehta Industries is laid on the money earned from that interest. Whatever this daughter-in-law, that is, *Memsaab*, might claim, but this alone is the truth.

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'Dada, I wanted to speak to you.'

Yes . . . yes, speak up.'

'Re...re-commend me to *Barre Bauji.'*

'Recommend? Good man, I have already done that for you.'

'But I have asked for it just now!' Javed was surprised.

'I mean, I have already told them that Javed is no ordinary man. He is Mangal Khan's grandson; Mangal-Khan-the-soldier-in-Netaji's-army. See how the family showers you with respect and honour when it meets you in the morning!'

'That's all right, but today I haven't come here as the grandson of the freedom-fighter Mangal Khan, but as one in dire need.'

Bisnath couldn't get anything: 'In need? Can you elaborate Javed?'

'Please *dada, Barre Bauji* won't refuse your recommendation.'

Presently something cracked inside Bisnath.

'Dada, just a small recommendation to *Barre Bauji* for employment in the factory.'

Hearing this Bisnath felt as if a photo-frame tucked on the wall had suddenly crashed down on the floor. The whole room went black despite light.

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'B... but, Javed-son, if boys from such well-to-do agricultural families as yours start deserting the countryside for cities, what will happen to those who have nothing to fall back on?'

'It is for this very reason, *dada*, that throughout the countryside, one neighbourhood after another is being vacated by those who have nothing to fall back on. Didn't your own family abandon the village to settle here?'

'Our case is different, but you have plenty of acres of land.'

'Yes, there was plenty of land and still is, but now the old main family has branched off into a number of small families. Each family now owns only four to five acres of land. Barely adequate to fill the bellies of the children. Not enough to nurture them handsomely.'

The scene when, on the spur of a moment, Javed's grandfather Mangal Khan had given this much land to Deendayal Mehta suddenly flashed before Bisnath's eyes.

'But didn't you say that the village is leaping fast towards progress?'

'*Dada*, do you call this progress? Progress means existence of good schools. Hospitals are necessary for progress. Dada, I want to provide good education for my children, but how? It is not possible in the village. Gone are the times, when country-children could rise to higher posts. Why don't you go and see for yourself, the condition of schools and hospitals in the countryside.'

Bisnath was struck dumb.

'*Dada*, I want to nurture my children into better human beings. That's why I request you to recommend me to *Barre Bauji*...' Javed faltered for words.

'Javed, son I shall try. Rest depends on your luck...,' Bisnath saw in Javed's eyes the same helplessness that years-ago he had seen in Dina-refugee's eyes when the latter, having been displaced by Partition, had arrived in his village. The only difference between the two was that then Deendayal Mehta had 'nothing-whatsoever of his-own' and now Javed, that is freedom fighter Mangal-Khan's-grandson, despite having 'everything' has 'nothing-substantial of his-own.'

An irreconcilable silence lay stretched between the two for a long time. Bisnath, who a little while ago had been craving to converse with Javed through the night now found every word of his sending needles into his heart. All his efforts at conversation to quench his heart's longings were effectively rebuffed by Javed's vacuous gaze.

Bisnath got up and switched off the light. The speckled beam of light that peeped through half-open windows seemed to stall the impervious darkness that was trying to encroach into the room. Bisnath tried hard

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to sleep, but his bird-like heart would repeatedly fly towards his village. Javed's restlessness in the bed also betrayed that he too was wandering through rugged wilderness. Exhausted, Bisnath's eyes at last surrendered themselves to sleep.

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Bisnath hadn't thought that he would ever come back to the village. But what was this; the village that he had come back to was surely not his. Or had it drifted away from his acquaintance? On a closer look he nevertheless realized that, he had actually come back to his own village. In the village ... like a child soiled in dust, who was now on the verge of adolescence. An adolescent bent on possessing every fancy item.

About half a dozen PCO booths, with their signboards proudly proclaiming 'twenty four hour home-abroad telephone facility' in bold letters, are the first to welcome him back in his 'adolescent village', the moment he gets down the rickshaw. The realization that now his-village-folks use telephones for making ISD-STD calls makes him happy. Right opposite these booths is a big shop of electronic goods, which in the city parlance may be called a 'show-room'. Colour TV sets to fridges, two-in-ones, VCD-CD players and even mobiles are available here. It is, however, a property dealer's board stuck at one of the PCO-booths that really surprises Bisnath.

A sweet anticipation adds pace to Bisnath's feet. He doesn't even register those he exchanges greetings with. He is in a hurry to reach home – the one he had built with his own hands. He really pities Javed's perspective that advocates abandoning a plenteous village for the city.

Bisnath didn't realize when, engrossed in self a talk, he had entered his neighbourhood. But what was this? Did this neighbourhood belong to him? Or was it merely an illusion of his? To overcome his doubt he straightaway headed towards Kisna-*chacha's* house. Seeing a padlock hanging on the door Bisnath thought that he might have gone somewhere near by. But the moment he turned back to leave, he heard a feeble voice calling him from the right, 'who is it, brother?'

The voice sounded familiar.

'Me, Bisnath.'

'Bisnath?'

'Yes, Bisnath,' replied Bisnath entering a semi-exposed veranda with ripped thatch and walls that had almost crumpled down on its two sides.

'What to do, I'm constrained by my eyes. Can't see. Can hardly remember.'

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When Bisnath saw the body fixed to the cot, his heart seemed to get stuck in his throat.

'Kisna *Chacha!*' Bisnath could hardly recognize him.

From the conversation he gathered that Kisna-*chacha's* sons, along with their family, had long time back left for the city—apparently for earning livelihood. Would only pay fleeting visits at intervals of four to six months, that too to attend some marriage or so. How do men like Kisna-*chacha* spend their days in these deserted houses? Even if the day passes by somehow, what about the night...From there Bisnath went over to his childhood friend, Rampat's house. However, even here he was witness to a similar scene. The whole neighbourhood seemed to him to be an island of waiting vacant-glances of emaciated and helpless oldies left back to keep a watch on the houses. An island of old people keeping vigil over locked doors!

In the meantime the whole neigbourhood came to know of Bisnath's arrival. Soon a crowd of old people gathered around him.

'It was good of you to leave this place when it was still time.' It was Kisna *chacha* commenting this time.

'Bisnath you are really fortunate to be with your sons and daughters-in-law. At least you are not in dire need like us.' His childhood friend Rampat's mother praised his luck.

Glancing sideways Bisnath noticed the crowd increasing rapidly. The circle of oldies soon enclosed on him and nearly suffocated him. How would he break free from this cordon? He found it difficult to even breathe. The suffocating sound rattled in his throat. Summoning all the strength at his command Bisnath eventually broke free of the circle and sped towards his house, but couldn't find it anywhere. What would Bisnath do now? Where to hide from the elderly crowd pursuing him? The place where he could have possibly hidden himself was only a barren piece of land now. Before Bisnath could come to a decision, he was once again 'engulfed' by the crowd. Bisnath knew that if he didn't act fast this crowd would surely suck the life out of him. So once again summoning his total strength, he screamed aloud to free himself.

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Da...Dada, what happened?' Hearing Bisnath's shriek, Javed got up hurriedly. Switching on the light he found Bisnath drenched in sweat. It seemed as if someone had emptied a pitcher of water on Bisnath. He was breathing heavily. Javed immediately realized that Bisnath had had the really bad nightmare.

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Javed picked up the tumbler of water kept nearby and handed it over to Bisnath. Even after drinking the water, Bisnath kept on staring vacantly at Javed for a long time. Then getting up, he switched off the bulb and lying on the cot silently, tried to sleep.

Thinking that there can't be a more opportune moment than breakfast, Bisnath took along Javed to the dinning-room. All three brothers or Bisnath's *Baujis* were already at the table. Noticing Javed accompanying Bisnath, *Barre Bauji* had an additional plate laid on the table. Despite Javed's repeated protestations it was *Barre Bauji's* wish that finally prevailed. Javed didn't want to come to the dining room in the first instance, but couldn't have his say before Bisnath. During breakfast there was a lot of conversation—a stock-in-trade breakfast-table talk. *Mem-Saab-that-is-Barre-Bauji's-wife-or-Shrimati-K*anta-Mehta discreetly gesticulated to her husband about his unbecoming behaviour—that is having breakfast along with a petty rustic, and that too a Mus ... thereby stooping low to equal him. But ignoring all hints, *Barre Bauji* silently carried on with his breakfast.

After breakfast, when the three brothers got ready to leave, Bisnath approaching *Barre Bauji* said, *'Bauji,* I want to have an important word with you.'

'Let's talk in the drawing room.' Saying this *Barre Bauji* headed towards the drawing room. The other two brothers, Bisnath and Javed followed him.

'Yes *kaka*...?'

' *Bauji,* if our Javed could be accommodated in our factory...'

Hearing Bisnath, all the three brothers looked at each-other. But none said a word. '*Bauji,* the boy is virtuous...promising...educated and from a noble family. The most important thing, *Bauji,* is that he is the grandson of Mangal Khan. The same Mangal Khan who had once...' Bisnath stopped halfway wondering why since yesterday or ever since Javed had arrived, Javed's grandfather has constantly surfaced in his conversation.

What was he up to just a moment ago; why was he trying to rake up the debris of that history and memory, the very mention of which irritates his master?

'That's all fine *kaka,* but...'

'Don't worry about anything *Bauji.* I'll stand guarantee for him. I'll take the responsibility for all good or bad, right or wrong that may transpire. Trust me, *Bauji.*'

'It's not that *kaka,* in fact...' This time *Manjhle Bauji* trailed off midway while wanting to say something.

Javed could sense that there was something that they won't divulge

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in front of him. Every trade has its closely guarded secrets that demand prudence. Justifying thus Javed, volunteered himself out of the drawing room.

On hearing what *Chhote-Bauji*-that-is-Niranjan-Mehta had to say the moment Javed left them, Bisnath was thrown into a turmoil. Everything went black before his eyes. Those words were like hammer blows on his eardrums. Once again the same dusty-and-soiled scene flashed before his eyes. Then it was Javed's grandfather Mangal Khan who, while giving away his five acres of land to Dina-the-refugee or Deendayal Mehta, hadn't bothered to ask him of his caste or religion. He had simply given away that piece of land to a man who had come to seek shelter in his village. The saplings planted on that land having grown into huge-trees were today casting doubts on the birds wandering in their shade in search of shelter and subsistence!

'*Kaka*, Niranjan is right. We trust you fully, for you have been working with us for years and you are almost like our own. But it is a bit difficult to trust these people,' *Barre Bauji* said supporting his brother.

Bisnath's nerves seemed to crackle. He was jolted by the insidious insinuations that lurked behind that *single word*. The fact that, despite working all these years for a family for which he had sacrificed all his life, he was only 'seemingly their own,' had cruelly shattered—like an unbaked pitcher—one of his cherished illusions. Would he be any better than Javed had he not slogged for the Mehta family for so long? What is the difference between him and Javed, then? Only that 'he is seemingly their own...' and Javed? Bisnath felt as if someone had forced bitter liquid down his throat.

'Anyway, it is okay *kaka*. When you are taking his responsibility for him, what objection can we have?' *Barre Bauji* ultimately stamped his approval on Bisnath's proposal.

Now, after so many years, Bisnath had realized that, a displaced person, having been uprooted from one's land, had no identity. But this realization had dawned on Bisnath too late, when almost everything of his was lost. Despite his strong desire, he couldn't possibly dump this *chowkidari* now and go away. The truth of the nightmare he had had the previous night coupled with the fact of the long service at 'Mehta kutir' had effectively chained his feet to this place as if to a boulder.

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Javed has since gone back to his village with a promise of returning soon. But Bisnath sincerely wishes that he does not come back. No doubt,

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he would get shelter on his return but this 'plunge of faith' really confuses Bisnath. Won't its illusory foundations take a toll of Javed's gullibility? Won't he be surviving solely on his own 'faith'?

Who could be the right custodian of Javed's faith/fate? Who would have the moral right over this 'judgment'—those who, having been uprooted from their own land had arrived at Bisnath's village for shelter, or those who having put locks on their fast decaying homes or having entrusted these to the care of their feeble-bodied and helpless elders have decided to enter into this fresh wilderness of displacement? Bisnath can't decide.

Translated from Hindi by Anup Beniwal

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Red and Yellow Bangles

C.G. Pai

When Janu reached home after the day's sauntering, her mother was not sitting outside feeding the fowl or combing her hair, as she usually did in the evenings. Hearing Janu enter the hut, the mother got up with an effort from the dark corner where she lay most of the day.

"Why are you late?" she demanded hoarsely between wheezy breaths.

Janu quietly opened her fist. Three soiled, torn, one-rupee notes lay crumpled there. Now this was unusual—Janu bringing home her occasional earnings.

"Don't waste the money this time on bangles and useless sweets," the mother tried to sound stern. She carefully removed two similar notes folded into the loincloth at her waist, pressed them into Janu's palm and said, "Get some salt and chilly from Mammade's shop, and don't forget, some tea and sugar."

"Come quickly, don't hang around," she said. "Don't lose the money. See that he weighs properly. And come back quickly, do you hear me?"

Whenever there were coconuts to be de-husked, or coconut fronds to be trimmed and stored away in the attic at the landlord's house, they would look for Janu. She was not a regular maid there, and was difficult to find when they needed her most. She did not like their balding cook who always smelt of smoke, stale sweat and old clothes that were washed infrequently. He would corner her in the bathroom, behind the cowshed, wherever. "Want some sweets?" he would grin, showing yellowing teeth that looked like the kernel of half-ripe jackfruit. And then there was the bustle at the bus-stand, the colourful hairclips and ribbons in the shops nearby, the kitten in the temple yard that played with her—who wanted to slog at the landlord's?

"Lazy," Amma, the landlord's widow would say. "Makes her mother work and eats up all the food at home. See how plump she has grown!"

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But sometimes Janu would appear from nowhere and stand quietly in the backyard until Amma remembered that the dung pit needed cleaning, or the hedge needed trimming. And then Janu would work as if possessed by the *Bhagavathi* herself.

"Must be hungry" Amma would say. "Otherwise would you get to see even her shadow?"

Afterwards Amma would give her the leftovers from the kitchen. Janu would eat as if she had been starving for months.

That afternoon Janu had not felt like working. She had gorged on the remains of a wedding feast her mother had brought—the rice, curries and *payasam* all mixed up because she could not find a separate container for each. But Amma wanted the backyard cleared of the remains of the seven jackfruits she had cut open to make fried crisps from, for the oncoming monsoon. After work Janu begged for some rice, or at least butter milk.

"What rice after I've given you money?" Amma was incredulous eventhough Janu did this every time she was given money.

Sitting cross-legged at his low slope-topped writing desk that also served as a counter, Mammade looked at Janu over his glasses, "O, Janu." She kept away from the other customers who packed the shop after the day's work. They would make fun of her, pinch her, take her money.... The green ribbon that she had bought during the festival—she never got it back. And the hairclip shaped like a butterfly had broken when someone snatched it from her. It could not be fixed again, but she still kept the pieces in a cardboard box on top of the legless wooden cupboard at home. She would often take the box down and try to stick the pieces together. Once someone had dropped an ice cube into the cleavage within her bulging blouse. Frightened, ashamed, not knowing what to do Janu had kept running until the ice melted and she did not know why she was crying. Some of these pranks stopped after she scratched at Kuttappan's face once, in an unexpected flash of anger. He had to walk around for the next few weeks with the shame of his misbehaviour stamped on his face.

"Tea dust, salt and chilly powder," she told Mammade.

"Tea and chilly? Does Janu add chilly to her tea?" Mammade laughed. He asked the man buying flour - "How do you take tea, with sugar or chilly?" The others hung around, expecting some fun.

Comments flew one after another. "Chilly powder? Look at the princess—cannot grind chillies?"

"Have you found some hidden treasure, Janu?"

"Why hidden? Enough treasures are evident there - see."

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"Do you drink tea Janu or mother's milk? Such a baby!"

"Drinking mother's milk? Can herself breast-feed others—look at her."

"Where's your baby, Janu? Did you feed him today?"

To such a question Janu usually replied that her son would join her soon, when he was old enough to attend school. She had been married off at fifteen—a thin unobtrusive girl. What happened at her husband's house, no one knew. She was back at her mother's within a few months. People talked—that she had been unfaithful to her husband, that she had seduced her father-in-law, that her husband's master had fallen for her willing charms....She was pregnant then, and the question on everyone's mind was, 'Who is the father?'

She was scarcely seen outside those days. She delivered a stillborn, or so they said, and it was not until a couple of years later that she started venturing out. Her mother was no longer able to work as before. The vegetable patches she used to water daily to grow lady's finger, spinach and cucumber and sell to nearby households at a low price, had long been converted to housing plots.

The bantering continued—"Do you feed only babies Janu or....."

"How many can you feed in a day..."

"They must all be queuing up in front of her hut after dark."

"No wonder she doesn't step out at night."

Wherever Janu went wandering during the day, she would rush back home before dusk, like a bird returning to nest. "There are monsters in the dark," she would tell her mother. She would keep a lighted lamp in her corner of the room while sleeping. Her mother could blow out the lamp to save on the oil only after she had made sure that Janu was fast asleep.

Mammade now said, "Let's see the money first."

Janu dropped the crumpled sweaty notes onto the counter.

"Look at them—who'll accept these old notes?" Mammade made a wry face. "We thought you've made a fortune."

Mammade thought he saw a sense of disapproval in the eyes of the shop attendant. "Fifty grams of tea, two sears of salt and one packet of chilly powder—the cheaper brand," he called out sternly.

"And don't be liberal—we are not running a charity here," he hissed.

He gave Janu a Parry's chocolate and said, "A much bigger one if you come to my house for de-husking coconuts. Why do you go to Amma's? Her sons all have grey hair, no?"

On her way back, Janu kept humming over and over, the only line of the only song she knew, slashing happily at the plants on the

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roadside with a stick. At Amma's she saw some urchins pelting stones to down raw mangoes. Hearing the stones crashing on the tiled roof of her cowshed, Amma came out. The urchins disappeared instantly. Amma let out a wail when she saw the broken tiles.

"See what I'll do when I catch you all," she cursed.

"Oh who's this? The bride?" She turned to Janu now. "And what is the bride doing here? Should be at home all dressed up. What rags you're wearing you she-devil? Go chase those boys away," she commanded.

Janu hurried off.

Her brother lay sprawled under the *Peepul* tree staring vaguely into the sky. Janu remembered her mother telling her not to give him any money if he asked for it. Her fist tightened on the loose change it held. He used to appear at home suddenly from nowhere, dead drunk, steadying himself on the creaking door, and demand money with their mother and quarrel with her. He would look funny but if Janu laughed, how he would box her ears!

Some beedi workers returning after their day's work smoking Charminar cigarettes or chewing *gutka*, colourful handkerchiefs tucked into and folded over the collars of their shirts accosted Janu. One of them pinched her bottom and they all laughed. But they fell silent and hurried past when they saw Janu's brother, who looked away, disinterested.

By the time she reached home her mother had come out at least ten times looking out for Janu. "Come in quickly" she said. There were guests on the veranda and Janu wouldn't have lingered there anyway. The mother smoothed down Janu's hair, wiped her face and thrust her out the back door. "Quickly, wear this sari and come out."

As she was changing Janu saw that Muthu the neighbour's son was grinning at her.

"Coming to play?" Janu asked. He shook his head. "Why are you grinning?" Janu spluttered out. He simply pointed with his chin to the front of the house where the guests were sitting, the grin showing his missing front teeth.

"Where's the sugar and tea?" her mother asked.

Janu didn't know. Tea—yes she had bought tea. But sugar - what sugar? She didn't buy any sugar.

Her mother opened her mouth to shout - 'You silly girl,' raised her hand and then fell silent. She dragged Janu onto the veranda where the four men were looking at one another with foolish smiles on their faces.

The oldest among them—the uncle—said to his nephew, "So. You've seen the girl."

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"May be I should make some tea....." the mother broke the ensuing silence.

There was no reply and so she said, "I shall send her and get some sugar and milk."

"Oh no, no, no" the uncle protested.

"I wanted to keep everything ready you see.... But I have not been keeping well."

"It's all right," the uncle said after a little hesitation.

"Please bear with us." The mother now pushed Janu back into the hut.

"Tea doesn't matter. The boy and the girl must see each other. That's what matters," the uncle said all-importantly. He referred to his nephew with greying hair and emaciated face as 'boy'. He took the shawl from his shoulder, unfolded it, folded it again, and placed it back on the shoulder.

"But of course...the dowry...." he said.

"I'm sure we....shall try and arrange that...."

As the men were about to leave, the nephew whispered something to the uncle.

"Some present he wants to give the girl," the uncle explained and nodded to the nephew who now went in. He slipped some red and yellow glass bangles over Janu's wrists saying "These are for you."

As she was looking at the bright clinking bangles he took a ten-rupee note and tucked it deep into her blouse. She suddenly smelt liquor and tobacco on his breath, felt something move inside her blouse and shrieked. Coming out as if nothing had happened the nephew said, "Oh nothing. Only a rat... She was frightened."

That was right, the mother assured them, Janu *was* afraid of rats.

As soon as the guests left the mother hurried in. Janu was standing there the front of her blouse torn open by her attempt to fish the rupee note from within.

"You wretch, why did you make all that noise?" Her mother hissed.

"See, how nice" Janu showed her the bangles.

"Will you never understand? Tell me. Why did you shriek?"

"I did not," Janu shot back.

"Don't you shout again. They haven't gone far yet."

"I will shout as much as I want. I don't like him," Janu was angry.

"You ungrateful wretch. First you forget the sugar and tea.... And then you shriek."

"I don't want to go with him," Janu shrieked louder.

The mother began to hit Janu who cowered, trying to protect herself.

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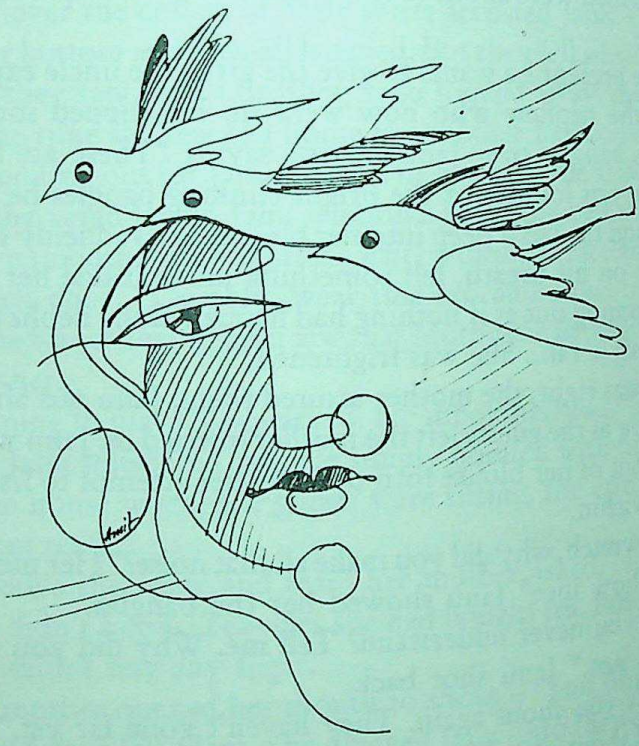
The blows landed on her raised arms and the bangles broke, the pieces scattering on the floor.

"What will I do with you? Do you think I will always be there to look after you?" the mother was weeping now, her blows weakening quickly.

"You've broken my bangles" there was a strange edge in Janu's voice and she stared incredulously at the blood on her wrists. With all her might she pushed her mother away and ran out of the house. The alleys outside were dark. Monstrous shadows were closing in on her from all around. Frightened, Janu ran and ran, faster and faster as if all the demons of the village were pursuing her.

❑



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Balance Sheet

Chandra Latha

The balance sheet was refusing to tally.

An entry was probably missing, either in the credits or in the debits.

Or there was an error, in subtraction or addition.

Shucks!

Vidheesa closed the file and tossed it on the table.

The whole day had been like this.

Everything she tried came up tangled like a ball of wool dropped to the floor.

Vidheesa twirled the audit pencil between her fingers.

Red on one side, blue on the other.

Interesting!

Anger there, peace here.

Fire there, water here.

Pooph! Mindless drift, making no head or tail of anything!

Right.

Head there, tail here!

Vidheesa tossed the pencil on the table and cracked her fingers.

If this drift continued, nothing would get done today.

It had been this way for several days.

One day was quite different from another.

What appeared significant one day seemed trivial the next.

How could a responsible person like her, engaged in such important work, be this inconsistent?

Inconsistency!

That was it. She remembered hearing about it somewhere.

That a woman was fickle, never stable!

Trash...!!

If somebody dared say that to her...!

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"Look! Before you hate the so-called fickleness, you have to understand your body..." Navya had said one day.

"What do you mean?"

"Biologically speaking.. .it is the chemicals in you that control your body, your mind, your behaviour and your moods, like invisible strings in a shadow play..."

"I don't get it..."

"Simple. It's your hormones, they fluctuate during your menstrual cycle, that's the real biological reason for the changes in your mood from day to day."

"Is that how it is? Who should understand this secret? Me? You? My parents? In-laws? Siblings? Co-daughters-in-law?"

"Everyone," Navya cut in.

"Does everyone include Pradyumna?"

"Of course it does, but before we get to your husband, you should understand yourself."

"Oh, come on, he should understand it first," insisted Vidheesa. "You tell him about this first," she added firmly.

"Ok, boss, I will," laughed Navya.

A stubborn fellow is more powerful than a king, the proverb goes. Well, in spite of being a busy gynecologist, Navya had acceded to Vidheesa's stubborn demand and rearranged her calendar so she could meet with her husband today.

But Vidheesa wondered if she should have been more flexible, at least a bit less stubborn.

Yes, but she had been troubled that Pradyumna had not been paying attention to anything lately.

"You have always been this way, stubborn to the core," her mother would say.

Stubborn, rough, unsophisticated, whatever epithet was thrown at her, doing what she was asked not to do, always excited her.

Yes, she could easily get by without lifting a finger, as her mother often said. But she could not be like that.

How could she be?

No way.

"Some people are like that. Luck favours them, but they can't help getting into trouble," mother had said, and continued on that line for a while.

She and dad had conferred and turned to Pradyumna, "Why don't you tell her?'

"Well, it's not a bad idea for her to go out and see how things

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work out there in the real world. Let her do what she wants, *it* would be good for everyone," he had said, supporting Vidheesa.

After that things fell in place rather quickly.

Vidheesa's entry into the market place, as the first woman auditor in this small town, had been celebrated with a lot of fanfare. Other auditors had given nice, long speeches on that day extolling the opportunities their profession offered for the advancement of women. She had received felicitations from one and all.

But it hadn't taken long for Vidheesa to be frustrated. Now she realized why Pradyumna had supported her so calmly.

Vidheesa chuckled, forgetting her annoyance.

It was no secret that Pradyumna thought way ahead. He must have believed that I would eventually fail and go back on my own, she thought. But she was no pushover either. She could match wits with him anytime.

The phone rang, snapping Vidheesa out of her thoughts.

It was Krishnamoorthy *gaaru*[1], the managing director of Penna Builders, "Emmaa[2]....Auditor-ammaa[3]... I was hoping you would find a tax loophole for me, but you sent me a huge tax bill," he complained.

That gave her an indication that her assistant Yamini had arrived at his office.

"I will take another look at it if you send the books with Yamini," she said.

He agreed and hung up.

Vidheesa sensed the disappointment in his tone.

Why hadn't she been able to gain the confidence of these people?

It had always been like this.

Dad would say to mom, "What do you women know about balancing books?'

Dad was a renowned auditor in the city. He was certain Mother had no chance of understanding accounting.

When he had noticed that Vidheesa was doing well at studies he encouraged her to go to medical school, and was disappointed at her interest in becoming an auditor.

"Vidhee....You are too young to understand the world. For someone sensitive like you it is very difficult to practice auditing and make a name for yourself. If you are so fond of maths, why don't you do engineering?"

The truth of the matter was mom would plan our household budget much better than dad. She knew how much to spend and how much

1 A suffix to a man's name in addressing him formally
2 Madam
3. Madam

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to save. And she would write down neatly all the household expenses, even to this day. From Jasmines to microwave, milk packets to party expenses, it had become a habit for her, just as dad would with his diary, to write down how much was spent for each and attach a receipt to each item.

When asked if she did all that just in case dad would ask for accounts, mom replied, "No, not that he would ask, but I should know how much we are spending and for what, and if something is necessary or frivolous."

When she gave pocket money to her and her brother, Mother would also give a pocket note book to write down how it was spent. Without accounting, she wouldn't give money again.

Mom never knew that she was a very competent auditor and financial manager. And then there was her mother-in-law who was an accounts officer in a bank.

She was the first one to encourage her when she announced she was going to start a private practice as an auditor.

And her father-in-law narrated an interesting experience.

"Look... I was then a Lead Bank Manager. We received a lot of petitions against the manager of a village branch. I had known the manager for a long time. She was a smart girl, a devoted worker. But the petitions were full of complaints about her behaviour and conduct.

We went to the village to investigate. Can you guess what we found? It looks like she has been riding a bicycle in the village wearing a *chudeedar*[4].

You see, we can't deny loans to folks in remote villages, particularly loans to buy a she-buffalo, to pay for farm expenses, things like that. But then, if we couldn't recover the loans, we get scolded by our superiors. If we try to collect, we are insulted, like this girl was.

There is no public transportation to these villages, so this girl bought a bicycle for herself. Since you can't ride a bicycle wearing a sari, she put on a *chudeedar*.

We didn't know what to say when the villagers asked us to explain her 'bad behavior'.

You see, her branch was the best in the whole district in recovering loans. What should we say? Well, the girl got fed up and requested for a transfer to the city."

He took a breath, and concluded, "That is how we respect women! That's how much independence we give them!"

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4 Tight narrow pants

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Dad picked it up there. "City is different. Look Pradyumna, the place you are moving to is neither a village nor a town. I think it is better for her to join as an assistant to a good senior auditor."

"But I had already been assisting you in the evenings as long as I went to college. What more can I learn as an assistant? I would like to have my own independent practice...." She could sense the welling of confidence in her own voice.

"But look.... Vidhee! How many women auditors do you think there are in our city chamber of commerce? Two or three at best. Even those women send their assistants to file assessments. I have never seen one of them come into the offices...."

"But Dad, isn't that what all senior auditors do, including you?"

"If I want to, or have to, there is no problem for me, Vidhee. But for women, there are invisible glass walls, layers of glass ceilings that wouldn't let you grow, that wouldn't let you move freely. You will find it out yourself. Right now you have no idea how the atmosphere around you can suffocate you..."

"I have confidence I can break those glass walls and ceilings."

"I wish you well. Just be careful not to get hurt."

Thaath!

That day she had brushed aside her father's concern.

Now she was realizing what he had meant. The world around her had its knives ready to cut her wings off.

That was true not only for her, but also for her assistants today.

Vidheesa mused about her assistants... Yamini, Suma and Ramana. How different they were!

Particularly Yamini and Suma....How come they had so little confidence in their skills and capabilities?

They came from different colleges, but didn't they each get their degrees with over 90% of marks?

Why were they so timid?

What were they afraid of?

Why didn't their education and employment give them the confidence they needed?

But Ramana, on the other hand, very confident, quick thinking, and got the job done skillfully.

He was younger than the other two and equally qualified. He would talk them into doing the work and get the credit for it!

He got along well with clients, and enjoyed it, while the other two... they remained crouched!

Suma in particular...

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Three years ago she had come to her straight after finishing her exams.

"So what do you know?" Vidheesa had asked her.

"Book keeping, profit and loss, sales and receipts, itemization, inventory, balance sheets, everything...." she had said, in one breath.

Yamini, who was standing nearby, had laughed aloud, startling Suma.

Vidheesa could still recall that moment and the passing expressions on the faces of the two girls.

Yamini had already been working with her for two years. That too, her education had been in English medium. Vidheesa had motioned Yamini to leave the room.

By then tears had already welled up in Suma's eyes.

"You shouldn't be crying for such a small thing. You want some water?" Vidheesa had asked her.

Suma shook her head No.

Langaa vonnee[5] .... Two braids...bird cage earrings.

"Ok then, tell me who sent you here?"

"Nobody sent me. I came on my own. I used to look at your board everyday on my way to the college. Our commerce teacher also used to tell us about you. Everyday..." she was on a roll.

So our reputation had reached the point of being mentioned in colleges, Vidheesa had wondered.

"So tell me, what is the most desirable trait in an accountant?" Vidheesa had asked again.

"Confidentiality, madam." She said, paused for a second and continued, "Our teacher told us about this also. He said you put this question to every interviewee. Is that true?"

Vidheesa had burst into laughter.

It was that innocence that had won for her the position of an accountant in Vidheesa's office.

Over the last two years she had proved to be better than Yamini.

What was she doing now? She had asked her to prepare the tax returns of Sai Medicals. She hadn't seen her since.

There was a cardboard partition separating her room from that of her assistants with a glass pane in the middle covered by a curtain.

Vidheesa opened the curtain and found Suma writing. Vidheesa tapped gently on the glass window. Suma lifted her head and looked at her. Vidheesa motioned her to come over.

"This balance sheet is not tallying. Maybe an entry is missing

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5. Long skirt and pleated half sari

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somewhere. Get the books and vouchers; we'll check everything again. Meanwhile I'll try tallying it one more time."

Suma left silently.

She didn't open her mouth. Her face revealed no emotions.

Strange!

Suma returned.

She laid a bunch of box files on the table and went back to bring a few more.

"That many?" Vidheesa knit her eye brows. This work was for assistants. She shouldn't be engaged in checking additions and subtractions. Cha..cha. But what was the alternative? That was the problem with private practice! Everything should be done right. It didn't matter who did what.

"Sai Chemicals' Al returns - Is it ready, Dear?' Vidheesa asked Suma.

Suma didn't respond.

She just stared at her with a blank face.

"Suma, I am asking *you*. Is the Al returns ready?"

No change in Suma's facial expressions. She stood there motionless like a statue.

Vidheesa grew impatient.

"Suma, bring me the file. I'll show you how to do it." Vidheesa said sharply and pursed her lips.

Suma brought the file and placed it in front of her.

Vidheesa opened it and flipped through the pages.

But she couldn't find copies of the sales tax returns that should have been filed regularly for each month of the year. Summing them up was the only way to come up with the yearly return.

"Where are the monthly returns, Dear?"

Suma stood stoic.,

"How can you do it without them?"

No response from Suma.

Vidheesa was growing anxious.

"What happened to those papers? Didn't we have all the copies?"

Suma remained motionless with downcast eyes.

"We don't have them?'

Suma shook her head sideways.

"Are they filed somewhere else? Did they get mixed up with other papers? Does Yamini know about this?" Vidheesa asked impatiently.

Suma shook her head I-don't-know, the only response she had for every question. Vidheesa's anger was bubbling up.

A basic lesson that she had taught every assistant right at the start was: File away a copy of every document. What happened then?

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"Suma, are you saying we don't have the copies?" Suma bowed her head down.

"What are we going to do then? How can we fix it?" Irritated with Suma, Vidheesa pressed her forehead with her fingers. To start with, she had just a few clients. If she couldn't take care of even their accounts, how could she establish her practice? It seemed to her that her assistants had been taking advantage of her mild manners. Vidheesa shook her head.

"OK, start over then and prepare the monthly statements," Vidheesa said firmly. But she was aware that wouldn't be easy. There should be no difference between the documents that had already been submitted to the Sales Tax Office and the ones Suma would prepare now. Even one missed entry would cause problems. That too, a business like a medical shop had purchases and sales, year-long MRPs, sale presses and prices... too many things to document! How could one recreate all those records! Vidheesa shook her head.

Suma picked up the files without lifting her head and left the office.

Vidheesa shifted in her chair in disappointment. What a shame! Keeping an office copy of records wasn't much to ask. They couldn't manage even that!

Yamini had gone to Penna Builders and didn't return yet. And Ramana didn't come back from the IT office.

Whoever would come back first, she would send to the Sales Tax Office to obtain a copy of the A2 returns. One should never have to go to that office for small things like this. However, no matter how diligent she had been, some small error crept up here and there. Dealing with so many departments and a myriad GOs hadn't been easy. It would have been nice if the clerks in the Sales Tax Office informed her of any errors, even better if they corrected them.

But the ridicule they heaped on you as they corrected the errors, their disparaging looks, annoyance, intolerance and jokes.. .cha cha.. .she herself felt irritated by them. These girls probably felt worse.

"As long as we behave obediently and agree with everything they say, they are fine, Madam, but if we insist on explaining something... that's it!" Yamini narrated one day. "They are very polite with you, Madam, but with us, their attitude is..." she paused there, effectively conveying her message.

So what should she do now?

She couldn't possibly go there with them every time. How could she create an atmosphere so the girls could go there alone without hesitation. How could she empower them? What kind of training could she give them?

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That too, a girl like Suma... who was timid to start with, who would barely say a word and get startled so easily, how could she go to this office and that, and get the job done? Dad had said this a long time ago. "Vidhee, you either join the practice of a senior auditor as an assistant or hire men as your assistants. Women will not be able to run around those offices."

"But why? In every office and bank you go to, the accounts departments are all staffed by women. Also, aren't there a tot of women working as assistants for auditors?

"True, but they are all nine-to-five jobs, isn't it? In March, April —when the annual auditing of a client involves overnight stay in his office —can you send your female assistant? Will her parents agree with it? Will she agree?" Dad had made his point forcefully.

Vidheesa had little doubt about her assistants willing to take up such difficult assignments, but current conditions weren't favourable. The society...family...the behaviour of individuals...

The question dad had asked was a critical one. Was the pace of her work entirely in her own hands? Did she have the freedom to go on a business trip?

Why was her competence evaluated as that of a woman? Could you look at a balance sheet and tell whether it was prepared by a man or a woman?

"But...look Vidhee, because you are a woman you are having to work ten times harder, suffer more tension and face more hardship. That's what makes me sad, Vidhee." She could never forget the trembling in Dad's voice.

"Madam..."

Vidheesa was started out of her thoughts.

It was Ramana. Vidheesa sent him back to the Sales Tax office.

And then she wondered if she could ever send Suma or Yamini on an errand like that, quite easily, without any hesitation!

She had been concerned about this.

Her clients had been slipping away one by one.

How could she prove her competence to them? How could she convince them to trust in her abilities? All those testimonials she earned and the gold medals...they weren't of much use. Nobody would care how well she could audit or prepare a financial report. How efficiently she could resolve issues wouldn't be appreciated by anybody.

Just as the M.D. of Penna Builders, Mr. Krishna Murthy, had said, "Can you reduce my tax bill? Can you help maintain the Number Two registers? Do you know how to launder black money?" Those were the talents in demand now.

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Could she do such things? What was she? An auditor, not a broker! An honourable professional, a financial intermediary between the government and the people. Wasn't her responsibility to make sure that her clients paid their due share of taxes? All that she had learnt in college —was that to help her clients escape paying taxes? Or pay them?

"You talk like that! How do you expect your practice to grow?" Pradyumna had remarked bluntly one day.

"Pradyu... There are plenty of honest, decent, legal methods to become rich. If people defraud on their taxes, how could we build roads, light the streets, have clean water delivered to our homes, maintain the public transportation systems, and run schools and hospitals?" she had retorted that day.

But she was aware he was right. An auditor's job was to cook books. That was what the world thought of them, and everyone, rich and poor alike, expected of them.

A professional duty separated from honesty, a lowly attitude devoid of professional values.

She hadn't been able to find a balance, and reconcile with the expectations of the profession.

She just couldn't do it. So she fell behind. But why should it be this way? Was it because she was incompetent? Because she wasn't smart enough?

Vidheesa rested her head on the palms of her hands. She felt a sharp pain as if stakes were being driven into her head.

What was Vidheesa? Her thoughts?

No!

Her skills and competence?

Not at all!!

Then what?

Her worldliness!!!

Yes, this was the truth in today's world. A successful person was one who avoided causing pain to others and hurting herself.

How could she stop thinking about these things? How could she get out of this headache?

"Look, Vidheesa, all this is affecting your health. You lost your appetite and you are not sleeping well. What is all this tension for? Do you know this is affecting Pradyumna too? You shouldn't let your work affect your personal life," even Navya lectured her one day.

"Thank you. That's what I have been telling her all along. If she does her work like everybody else, there wouldn't be any problem. But the way she is, irritable all the time, she is asking for trouble," her mother

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chimed in, anger evident in her tone. "Does she need this income? At the expense of her health?"

Income! What income? There was nothing to write home about her clients. They wouldn't even employ their own accountants. Her assistants did everything for them right from budgets to their vouchers to their balance sheets. They just signed all the tax forms after her assistants filled them and then they gave her the run around when it was time to pay her the auditor's fee. 'We could have saved a lot on taxes with that other auditor. He would have done better in managing the IT folks. He is much better than you at maintaining the Number Two books.' They put her down like that, dropped hints that they might not need her services next year, and then paid her less than what was due to her.

What could she do about it? Nothing, because she had to be accommodative to retain the client.

Cha...cha...

After all that education... all that training...

Disgusting...

The phone rang just then.

It was Pradyumna.

"I talked to Navya," he said.

She didn't respond, anticipating he had more to say.

"She thinks it is all due to a battle of hormones."

Vidheesa laughed lightly, imagining the biology lesson that Navya must have taught and how attentively Pradyumna must have listened to her.

"I had no idea about these biochemical reactions that go on in women, the fluctuation in hormone levels and the turmoil they cause." His voice quivered emotionally. "I am sorry, Vidhee. If I said things in ignorance that..."

"Wait a second, Sir. Did I ask you to apologize?" Vidheesa cut in, sharply. "No, you didn't." Pradyumna said, defensively.

"Pradyu... you just said it was a battle of hormones!" Vidheesa laughed aloud. "It's a battle of wits. A battle of wits which should go on .. .and on..."

"Ok. Carry on...". Pradyumna too laughed and hung up.

Vidheesa reflected briefly on the fondness in the voice of her husband.

Having heard a gentle tapping on the glass window in the partition separating her office from that of her assistants, Vidheesa opened the curtain.

It was Yamini. She just wanted to let Vidheesa know that she had

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returned from her errand. Ramana was there, too. Suma was sitting at her desk with her head buried in a ledger.

Vidheesa closed the curtain, and remembered she had been trying to find out why the balance sheet wasn't tallying. Concentrating on her work again, she found soon where the error was.

Copying a number from the end of one page to the beginning of the next, they forgot a zero, a zero that transformed 2 lakh Rupees to twenty thousand!

Such a small error! And how much time it had taken to fix!

Just one zero, that messed up everything; created so much turmoil.

A zero...which means very little!

Vidheesa recollected Navya saying a similar thing about men and women. "Genetically speaking...you know how little difference there is between men and women? Just one chromosome. Forty six somatic chromosomes are identical between the sexes. Of the two other chromosomes, the sex chromosomes, only one is different. Just one in forty eight! And see how much trouble it causes us!"

Just one chromosome!

Such little difference! And yet, such a sprawling edifice of humanity was built upon it!

Vidheesa sighed, tried to push her thoughts aside and concentrate on her work.

Yamini brought to her the worksheets of Sai Medicals. Vidheesa went over the entries carefully and calculated the tax payable. Giving the file back to her, Vidheesa asked her to communicate with the Sai Medicals about their tax return. As Yamini left, she asked her to send Suma in.

A half hour went by, an hour, then another half hour and yet no sign of Suma.

Meanwhile, Vidheesa completed work on the balance sheet, closed the file, and looked again for Suma.

That was unusual! Why was she behaving like this today, ignoring her when she asked her to come see her! What were the three of them doing!

About to knock on the glass door in the partition, Vidheesa changed her mind and walked over to the side of her assistants.

"Madame wouldn't like it if we tell her, but what they are saying is, 'You follow rules very nicely, do your book-keeping well, have your clients pay taxes properly and all that, but you don't follow our formalities. That's the only problem with you.' "Ramana was parroting what he had heard at the Income Tax Office and the two girls were listening to him without lifting their heads out of their books.

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"You know where the auditors and officers come to an understanding about a lot of tax cases? It is usually during their morning walks, or at the Tennis Club in the evening... or at some party at night. Imagine our madam like that.. .cha.. .cha..."

By then the girls already saw Vidheesa who had walked into their section. Their faces reflected hesitation and anxiety. Ramana hadn't seen her. With a finger pressed against her lips, Vidheesa signaled the girls to remain silent.

"In fact nothing happens without involving the auditors, whether it is scrutiny or a raid.

"That is how close they are with the officers. The other day, there was a raid on our client Swarna Hotels. How do you think that happened? It was engineered by our rival, Prasad Consultancy, so our client would suspect we did it; they hope to snatch our client away next year. That is how things work. One officer was saying, 'It is difficult even to ask your madam about formalities.'"

"Did he say why it is difficult to ask?"

Ramana was startled to hear the question from Vidheesa.

"That..." Ramana muttered something under his breath.

"That...he told us already," chimed in Yamini. "How do you ask women?"

"Is that it?' Vidheesa asked, probingly.

"It looks like they said, 'Ramana, why don't *you* come? Why do you send those girls? It is embarrassing even to talk to them.'" Yamini blurted out.

Vidheesa remained silent.

But what would they like to talk about? Formalities? What formalities? Formalities was a code word for the unofficial fees that had to be paid even before the tax was paid, even before the auditor's fee was paid. It had to be offered to seek the goodwill of the officer. But if it was embarrassing to solicit bribes from women, that was for the better! More money would reach the Treasury! Amen!" A hint of a smile flashed across Vidheesa's face.

Not that she wasn't aware how difficult it would be to be straightforward. When you interfere with the channels of their easy income, they would be upset, of course. Ramana was right. Auditors and officers did have an unspoken understanding! Vidheesa sighed.

She looked at Ramana, who was anxious what she might say to him.

"OK, Ramana, you can go home now. We have a lot of work

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tomorrow. You should be here early in the morning," she said with a gentle smile.

Ramana felt relieved. Vidheesa went over to her section and sat in her chair. She recollected all the speeches, encouraging words and felicitations that were showered on her by the auditors of the town on the day she had formally opened her practice. She couldn't help smiling. The very same folks were trying to undermine her practice today!

Ramana left. Yamini came over to tell her about Suma. For a second, Vidheesa's mind went blank. Recovering from the shock, she telephoned Doctor Navya to send an ambulance and gave some money to Yamini and sent her away to buy a new dress. Then she picked up a sanitary napkin from her desk and rushed to where Suma was.

Suma was bleeding like hell! Vidheesa became pale frightened that Suma might faint.

Just then Yamini returned with a new dress and helped Suma change. The ambulance arrived and Suma was soon brought to Navya's hospital. Navya gave her an injection, set up a saline drip and stabilized her condition. Yamini telephoned Suma's family and appraised them of her condition.

Navya escorted Vidheesa into her office and explained to her about Suma's case. Vidheesa listened with her head rested on her palms.

"Vidhee.. .It is unbelievable that this girl did not go into a coma. She lost a lot of blood. We may have to give her a blood transfusion. I think we can control..." Navya spoke rapidly. "Vidhee, this is quite common for students just before exams, and for employed girls. DUB - dysfunctional uterine bleeding ... that is what we call it. Treatment by itself is not enough in these cases; she needs psychological support from you, me and everybody."

"Sorry, Navya. Suma was in the office since morning. I didn't know she had a problem like this. I just thought she was moody for some reason. Sorry, I never imagined this. She could have told me about it, but she didn't..." Vidheesa regretted not having asked Suma about her health.

"They don't. They don't even tell me! I ask them a hundred questions and I barely get an answer to one. There are countless reasons that prevent them from talking. You think all women can talk freely like you and me? There are a lot of things they can't talk about," Navya said, her face revealing intense emotion.

"How long..." Vidheesa's voice trailed off. "Suma...How long has she been bleeding?" "For about two hours I would say."

It must have started at about the time Ramana arrived, thought Vidheesa, reflecting on the events of the day. He came and sat down

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with the girls. Oh! That was probably how it happened! He was sitting there the whole time and Suma was probably afraid of revealing her condition if she stood up from her chair. That must have been the reason she remained seated the whole time as long he was there. That poor Ramana had no clue. He was there trying to help her with her work.

In hind sight, Vidheesa recollected Suma's face being pale when she had walked over to that side of their office. Pale, tight-lipped, still, head bowed... goodness! Vidheesa felt awfully guilty, weak in her heart.

"I was annoyed with Pradyumna for not recognizing the influence of fluctuating hormones on the way I feel, and here I am, completely oblivious to what my own assistants might be going through!" Vidheesa was disappointed with herself.

"Relax, Vidhee. Look at it this way. If a man were in your place...If all her colleagues were men.. .Imagine her embarrassment...!" Navya tried consoling Vidheesa.

This girl Suma, who would cry even when Yamini teased her... How embarrassed she must have been .. .ashamed.. .frightened.. .How awful! The thought of this delicate girl suffering through all that made Vidheesa's head spin.

"You know very well, Vidhee, we are the descendents of folks who disrobed a helpless woman in front of the assembled court."[6] Navya's voice trembled. "Suma was fortunate. There was at least a bathroom in your office. Yamini was nearby to talk to. You were around to give her a sanitary napkin. Had it been some other place.. .some other situation... she would have remained there ashamed, helpless, scared... who knows how long and what would have happened to her!"

Vidheesa was frightened at the very thought.

"We have to teach our children, our women and also our men about the normal physiology of our bodies. There is nothing shameful, disgusting or repulsive about it. This natural cycle will always control women's bodies. Chemical reactions in our bodies will control our behaviour, and, the struggles and anxieties in our daily lives in turn influence these reactions. Vidhee, we need balance..." Navya's voice grew low and sad, "There has to be a balance."

True. What Navya said was true. There should be a balance.

But the balance sheet wasn't tallying.

Somehow the image of the woman employed at the village bank, mentioned by her father-in-law, flashed in front of her eyes. Whether

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6. A reference to Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*

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it was her or somebody else, every woman, mother, mother-in-law, Suma, Yamini, Navya, everyone was played by the same string.

And that string was badly tangled up. Too badly to straighten out.

Vidheesa recollected what her mother-in-law had said about that woman in the village bank.

"Every one of us bank employees gossiped about her. 'She is out of control, she has no shame,' and the like were said about her. We all talked like that. We just looked at her through the eyes of the petitions filed against her. We could not imagine that her behaviour reflected her commitment to work, her honesty as an individual, and her dedication to her work.

Translated from Telugu by Ari Sitaramayya

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Baso Mai's Story

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

A congenial, sun-soaked February afternoon sees four women gathered around the village hand-pump, filling their large brass, aluminium and plastic vessels with water, and their intrinsically loquacious feminine selves with idle prattle and other gossip. The weather was balmy, the sun thermostatically placed at a position midway between HI and LO by Mother Nature. Mild, that's right, just the right warmth to bring people out into the courtyards to bid a pleasant adieu to the parting rigors of a winter season lasting three long months. The signs of spring are conspicuous—unripe foliage and pristine buds dangling from mango trees, bright yellow mustard blossoms in kitchen gardens, loudspeakers blaring in anticipation of the upcoming Saraswati *puja,* and the good old vernal breeze that, since aeons, has been one common muse for poets and aesthetes everywhere.

The discussion is animated, spanning homes, families, village, market, vegetables, clothes, food, children, weather, festivals... So much, and more, in those few minutes that each woman took to pump the metal handle till the water flowed over the brim of her vessel. Two other women join the group, and the conversation stretches. More gibberish, more giggles. Marvellous! How much she can speak. The doyenne of this assembly. And how much sway she holds over her listeners.

A lady of words, with a magical ability to bind her audience, to speak her heart out, and to receive a similar response in return. How many people can hold such an informal and selfless session with the assured participation of every member present?

She laughs, a loud confident laughter, tossing her head (and a few loose salt and pepper strands running down her temples) back and topping it off with a child-like chuckle, covering her mouth with her hand, just like a shy, pubescent girl. She's the boss, the tall woman in white cotton

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sari. Dusky, with a loud, but pleasant, voice. And a laughter to complement every line that she's spoken.

Two small children run upto the group and tug at her sari.

'Baso *mai*...Baso *mai*... What's taking you so long? You asked us to wait under the *jamun* tree, and now you're the one who's delaying. Come now.'

They complained.

Baso *mai*—that's what this formidable old woman is called. A friendly name for a very friendly person. Baso *mai* looks abashed. She smiles. 'I've to move,' she declares. Wait till I take this pitcher home. You all run along.' And her strong, albeit old, arms ensconce the hefty, water-filled brass pitcher in the curve of her right arm, placing it's base firmly on her right hip. She, then, marches towards home with a gait that belied her age.

The meeting is dismissed. No boss, no meeting.

☆ ☆ ☆

'Did Sukra really kill the demon?'

An inquisitive five-year-old enquires. The venue of the meeting has been shifted, from the bustle around the village hand-pump to the sunny, somniferous patch under a huge, ancient *jamun* tree. The delegates have shrunken, in size and age. The presiding authority, however, remained the same—Baso *mai*. The amiable hexagenarian is sitting on a palm-leaf mat, basking in the late-winter sun, addressing a gathering of three- to six-year-olds, all ears to their old leader, as she narrates the exploits of Sukra, the tribal hero who lived, in fairy-tale tradition, a long long time ago.

'Yes, darling. Sukra was a powerful man. Decapitating the green demon was a child's play for him. The huge head of the green demon falls on the ground and Sukra hears the beautiful princess calling out his name. Sukra... Sukra...'

Seven pairs of eyes, transfixed, gazing intently at the motherly countenence of the old woman who's taking their young minds on a journey through the realms of magic and fantasy. To the lands that lie beyond their imagination, where the sun and the moon shine and gambol happily together in the fluffy playgrounds of the blue heaven, and stars swing engagingly from the dainty boughs of tall, magical trees. To the lands of princesses fairer than the fairest, and heroes stronger than the strongest. To the lands of nine-headed demons, wicked chieftains, conniving stepmothers, conspiracy-concocting witches, ghouls, and other talismanic entities.

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'Sukra fought in Cartoon Network-style?'

Another five-year-old demands an explanation and Baso *mai* finds herself struggling for an answer. What'd she say? She doesn't know what this Cartoon Network is. She doesn't watch TV. She doesn't understand this modern means of infotainment.

But she need not worry. In this small, tribal settlement, this illiterate, unlearned dusky old lady holds more clout than any *diku* TV station. A six-year-old comes to her rescue, although unknowingly.

'Eh! Sukra is real. He lived a long time ago. This Cartoon Network is all fake. *Baba* told me.'

Hmmm... So much trust. No wonder, Baso *mai* is an integral part of the day-to-day life of Tupodih. Ever since her arrival some two years back she's found herself turning into a favourite of almost everyone here, whether young or old. Blame it on her persona, her convivial spirit, her gift of the gab, her perennially smiling face, or her infectious laughter, Baso *mai* has turned out to be an exquisite piece of embroidery in the quotidian tapestry of Tupodih.

Tupodih—a village of farmers and government employees. Tupodih, which was, about sixty years ago, another nondescript dot on a map of that part of the Chhotanagpur plateau which is now formally known as the Singhbhum district. Tupodih, where ninety-five percent of the population is Santhal, and the remaining five, Mundas; all of them followers of Sarna, the aboriginal faith of Chhotanagpur. Tupodih, standing right above the mineral-rich core of the Indian sub-continent. Copper, Iron, Uranium, Manganese, Gold, Selenium, Sulphur, Zinc. Tupodih, which had witnessed a meticulous recce, and then, a copper mine and a factory being built just outside its southern frontiers. Tupodih, which bore the repercussions of development, of the nationalization of the mine and the factory, the opening of two more quarries and the confiscation of the villagers' properties for building of roads and quarters. Tupodih, which saw its men being given jobs of unskilled labourers in the mines and the factory in return for giving up the land which was rightfully theirs and the fecundity of which they had been serving since as long as long as they could remember. Tupodih, which is a standing testimony to the collapse of an immaculate, agrarian tribal society and the dilution of the untouched tribal culture, the gifts of industrialization and progress. Tupodih, which, sixty years and a series of metamorphoses later, has acquired the lineament of an offshoot of the Copper Town itself, with concrete houses, cable television, two-wheelers, hand-pump, a narrow, winding tarmac that everyone calls 'main road', and a primary school.

Not everyone is farming anymore. Most of the men (some women,

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as well) are working in the mines and the factory as labourers and navvies. Those of who had the opportunity and the good fortune of having attended schools and colleges and earning degrees and diplomas are working in banks and other offices. Three young men have been enrolled in the Indian Army. A big step, indeed, considering what *adivasis* have done and how they've led their lives so far.

In this society, where virtues and a certain quaint innocence nestles cheek by jowl with the usual vices—boozing, boozing and losing all one's bearings; having a woman at home and a fling outside; spawning babies in a manner befitting rabbits and guinea-pigs; superstition; illiteracy—Baso *mai* makes an entry, and ends up changing the lives of many people.

☆ ☆ ☆

First, the lives of Soren *babu*, his wife, Pushpa, and their three children.

Soren *babu* works in a bank. Baso *mai* found a home in Tupodih courtesy Soren *babu*, who'd brought her home much to Pushpa's chagrin.

'Who is she? I haven't seen her before.[1]

That was a fact. Pushpa had never seen Baso *mai*, nor had she heard about her from anyone.

'A distant relative of mine,' Soren *babu* tried to explain. 'Her name is Basanti. Basanti *jhi*. I call her Baso *mai*. Her sons work somewhere in Bengal. In Barddhaman. They are unable to look after her. So I brought her here. If you don't mind...'

Pushpa was annoyed, definitely. But then, she saw Basanti—wearing a dirty, crumpled *dhoti*, holding a huge bundle against her bosom, downcast eyes, fear and misgiving in every look, almost hiding her tall figure behind the diminutive Soren *babu*—and felt sorry for her. Plus, Basanti looked benign. Otherwise why would her husband bring her here in the first place? Looking at her age she ruled out every possibility of Baso *mai* holding a knife to her throat and demanding cash and jewellery.

'No, I wouldn't mind,' Pushpa consented. 'But let her take a bath first.'

Next day onwards, Baso *mai* began working. She'd leave her bed before anyone in the family and mop the entire house. She'd then do the laundry. Pushpa was amazed-this old woman...

'No, Baso *mai*. Don't do all that. I can manage.' She told Basanti. 'No, *baahu*. You already have so much to do. I'm in the habit of working. This is almost nothing.' Basanti replied, as jovial and eager as ever.

Pushpa didn't say another word after that. She was pleased, very pleased. Now, all she did in the mornings were, get up, take a bath,

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and cook the breakfast. What more could a woman, burdened already with an office-going husband, three unruly school-going children and a whole lot of washing, cooking, cleaning, dusting, cutting, chopping and grinding, ask for?

Soren *babu* and Pushpa were proud parents of three children. The eldest one, a daughter—Sangita, aged seven years, and two boys, twins—Shyam and Gopal, two years younger than the girl. While Soren *babu* was a happy father, the same couldn't be said of his wife. Her nirvana came when the kids were at school, or else she could turn into an ogress, or worse. Most of her time was spent (or wasted) in forcing them to do their lessons or keeping them from doing any mischief or watching too much TV. Soren *babu's* salary didn't allow his family the luxury of hiring the services of a maid. So, throughout the day, poor Pushpa would be on her toes.

In Baso *mai,* Pushpa found a baby-sitter, a house-keeper, a laundry woman, a vegetable chopper, a masala grinder, a fish scaler, a back scrubber, a scalp masseuse, a confidante, a companion.

Soren *babu,* who didn't have an immediate family, found a motherly figure.

Sangita, Shyam and Gopal inducted a new member into their gang.

Baso *mai* found a family, and friends.

Maina Mardi, the old woman living next door, became a chum. Every morning, she'd traipse across the *Hibiscus* hedge into the Sorens' backyard as Basanti sat there on a *machi* peeling spuds and cutting aubergines, okra, marrow, spinach and drumstick leaves for lunch,

Both the women would sit there and unspool the yarns of their daily gossip. Maina complained that Shanti, her daughter-in-law, didn't give her enough to eat. Basanti was, perhaps, the only person in the whole of Tupodih who seemed to understand the acute epicurean yearnings of this ill-fed mother-in-law. However, it had taken Basanti only one patient heart-to-heart to fathom the actual reason behind Maina's ungratified cribbings. It wasn't that odd ladleful of rice during lunch or that extra spoonful of sugar in the morning tea that she'd been denied by her daughter-in-law. It was the daughter-in-law herself. Maina called it food, as she found it easier to express her desire for something that could whet the unquenched cravings of her stomach. What she really needed on her stainless steel salver were not heaps of *muri*, flavoured with mustard oil or thick tamarind chutney and seasoned with sliced onions, mashed potatoes and sprigs of coriander. No amount of victuals could satisfy old Maina. She wanted her son, who now belonged to his wife. She wanted her grandchildren—two small girls and one small boy.

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The earth is round, concluded Basanti. You start from somewhere, and end up landing at the same place after seeing the entire world. Every evening, Basanti would go for a walk and stop for some chit-chat with old Dashrath Murmu. Old Dashrath was a widower and lived in a small cottage near the hand-pump with his daughter Bijoya and an invalid, teenage son.

Bijoya was of a marriageable age and had the ordinary Santhal girl appearance—five-feet-and-a-few-inches tall, a bit dark, quite plump, soft-spoken - but what set her apart from the other girls of the village was her education. She was a graduate, an honours holder in History, and aspired to become a teacher. And this is where the problems began. Santhal men go for looks. Bijoya knew it very well that her gold medal could get her a good job, but when it came to marriage negotiations, the medal ended up intimidating the suitors. A girl had to be fair, fair enough to dazzle the men who came to see her. With a wrong complexion (and her degree) she didn't have too many chances. An engineer came, but he wanted an equal—an engineer or a doctor. Bijoya was neither. The fact that his daughter could cook, clean, sew, sweep, raise children, look after the old, even clean byres and split firewood at times, wasn't attracting too many men to Dashrath Murmu's house. Add to it, a nasty rumour spread by a rancorous relative that the girl practised sorcery. Her mother's death, her brother's cripple, her father's failed paddy crop, even her degree, everything was attributed to the coven she attended and the sinister deities she paid obeisance to. This did it.

A few families were still considering this dark, plump girl ('so what if she isn't fair?' 'so what if she wishes to work?'). Even they backed out.

Basanti had been shocked, initially, on hearing Bijoya's story. As if some long-forgotten episode of her own life, a stinging, painful recollection, had ricocheted and jabbed her hard. Like a thin rubberband, that snaps in the process of tying a chignon and hits the fingers. Agonizing.

Educated people can say things like this? That too about a girl who, in her opinion, was virtue personified.

Basanti stopped talking to Dashrath about his daughter. But the old man would revert to Bijoya. This gave him certain uncanny comfort. Basanti couldn't help it. Educated, able-bodied women don't need a husband to guide them through life, she'd try to hint. Your daughter is smart and qualified enough to build her own destiny. Why do you wish to tether her to a useless bloke who'll never appreciate her worth?

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Two years passed thus, breathing in the aroma of this village. Savouring the singularity of every person and one's own unique flavour. Often, a flux of fomentation would run through Tupodih somewhat altering the palate. Baso *mai* took in everything with equanimity. She's come to know all, like the eclectic fare spread over a buffet counter. She knew all the tastes—sweet, salty, sour, tangy, spicy, even bland and bitter. But she had only one flavour to add to this already heady concoction—sweet. No matter what she found on her plate, whether green chillies or *neem* leaves crushed on the *sil lodha,* she never let go of her pot of sugar or her lumps of jaggery. Sweetness, she spread, and for the most part, sweetness, she received. These two years.

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Vijaya Dashami.

The last day of the Durga *puja.* The day of the victory of the Good over the Evil. The day Ramachandra shot an arrow through Ravan's navel, bringing to its end an era of terror and nihilism.

Vijaya Dashami. The last day of the most popular festival of eastern India. The Copper Town was illuminated and throbbing with life. The normally sleepy town had woken up to pay one last reverence to the *Devi* before her clay avatar was relegated to some river-bed.

The roads were crowded, with men and motor vehicles. Dazzling *pandols,* beautiful idols. Bollywood and Bangla hits blaring amidst sacred incantations, *phuchka* and chow-mein stalls, fidgety children, dressed-up adults. A tall effigy of Ravan towering over the hullabaloo.

Tupodih was also bustling with enthusiasm. Men, women and children, in resplendent new clothes, walking over to the town to wallow in the festivities. An instance, *sui generis,* of an exquisite blending of cultures. Sarna, too, has a theory about the Mother Goddess.

Sangita, Gopal and Shyam were already at a *pandol.* Heads bowed reverently and little palms clasped in prayer. The children were naughty, but they knew their manners. Soren *babu* looked at them and bowed his head.

I seek all the happiness for my family, peace, and prosperity. Ma Durga, grant me my wishes.

Pushpa and Baso *mai* were at home. They couldn't go. And with what was happening in their neighbour's home it didn't seem too proper for them to go into the town for some revelry.

Maina's grandson was sick. The four-year-old was running a high fever. One-hundred-and-four degrees Fahrenheit. God knows from where

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he caught it. He had gone to the town, the previous day, with his father and two older sisters to look at the deities. He was all right at the time. He'd returned home, happy and healthy. At night, he begun squirming. Maina couldn't talk to Basanti that day. Even when Basanti was at Maina's place, sitting on her grandson's cot, the old women couldn't exchange too many words. Situation warrranted that they maintain a sombre silence.

Ekadashi.

The morning after the festivities. The roads were silent. The town was asleep, tucked inside a quilt of weariness after nine days of motion and merry-making. Streamers and festoons, marigold garlands and papier-mache discs, leaf bowls and *mirchi patakha* shells, the remnants of a holy event lay scattered all over like a transgressor, imprecated to grovel in the dust.

The malediction didn't stop here, at these, inanimate objects alone. It travelled out of the Copper Town, and seemed to linger above Tupodih in the form of a thick, white mist. Smoky, eerie, ominous.

It descended from its aerial perch and entered Maina's house.

Maina was wide awake. The old woman hadn't slept a wink. She was waiting for her son, daughter-in-law, and her grandson. The boy had been taken to the hospital late at night. They returned. Son, daughter-in-law, and the dead body of the grandson.

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The last rites were over. Life in the village was back to as it had been before this sudden and shocking demise of Maina's grandson. But life wasn't the same anymore for both Maina's and Soren *babu's* families.

This was the third death in this village in two years, that is after Basanti's arrival. Two old men, so old that their staying alive would've been seen as a miracle, were the first ones to die. But Maina's grandson was still a child.

All of a sudden, Basanti's presence began to matter. The boy's death was unnatural. Soren *babu* found himself unable to answer the same questions that Pushpa had asked him two years ago. The flippancy in her tone was gone. She was determined, she demanded a proper answer.

'Who is Baso *mai*?'

Maina was put under house arrest. No talking to Basanti, Shanti decreed. Earlier, the old women used to share gossips under the *jamun* tree. Now, the daughters-in-law held a dialogue under its leafy foliage. But while Basanti and Maina had loud and lengthy chat sessions, Pushpa and Shanti kept their conversations short and discreet.

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Pushpa began drawing lines. She'd made it a point to get up at around the same time as Baso *mai*. Even if it meant waking the entire house with the shrill noise of the alarm clock. The early-winter chill tortured her, but she had to keep Basanti away from the kitchen and their clothes.

'No, I'll do them Baso *mai*. Why don't you go and get some more sleep?'

The children were unusually quiet. Gopal and Shyam were whipped mercilessly by their mother. Sangita was scolded for no reason.

'Such a big girl! Can't even keep her shoes in place. Who'll do it for you? Baso *mai*? She's going to stay here forever or what?'

That said it all.

Soren *babu* saw, heard, perhaps, even understood everything, but said, practically, nothing. Silence slithered around the house like a krait delving its way through a dense undergrowth. Silent. Sinister.

Tom and Jerry made no noise. Shahrukh sang no more songs to Rani and Preity. Even Nidhi Kulpati and Debang spoke so softly, only Soren *babu* could hear them.

The murmur began only when the children were asleep. But Baso *mai* could hear it quite well. In their room, Pushpa would jabber on and on like a maniac, and Soren *babu* would hush her up in his calm, composed voice.

One night, he lost his cool. And Basanti heard what she'd feared all this while. Suspicion, screaming at the. top of its voice. A snapped rubberband hitting her sharply. Memories, ugly and agonizing, coming back to her mind.

Soren *babu* screamed at Pushpa—'So what do I do then? Go and tell her that she is a witch and grab her hair and shove her out of the house?'

That's it. She knew it. She's a *witch*. She'd killed her own grandson. Her sons had disowned her. How could she expect strangers to accept her? She, really, is a witch.

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Basanti doesn't remember too much about her childhood, except those colourful stories about magic and heroes she'd heard from her grandmother, and, the cheeky songs her mother and aunties used to sing during weddings and festivals. Chapri—that was the name of her village, but all she could recollect about that place now were its lush, green fields where she'd spent her entire childhood herding cattle, goats and sheep. She doesn't remember her parents' home, nor the way to her village, which, she

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remembered her elders saying, was somewhere in Bengal. She must've been just fourteen when she was married off to a man, a farmer, more than double her age. She was a shy, naive Santhal girl, unschooled, illiterate, who'd seen neither a car, nor a bus, nor had she ever ventured outside Chapri.

Her marriage changed her life. Her groom brought her to Salbani, his village, in a train. The huge, black steam locomotive had fascinated her. She passed through so many new places, got down at the railway station, and walked three miles on the orange, gravelled road that took her and her groom, along with all his relatives, to Salbani. But alas! She was a new bride, her head covered with the *aanchaar* of the turmeric-dyed handloom sari, her eyes fixed on the ground, hardly rising upwards. She walked through so much, and yet, saw nothing.

Life gave her many opportunities to feast her eyes on things that fascinated her and things that she'd only heard about when she was a young girl in Chapri. Her man took her to *haats* where he bought her sweets, glass-bangles, collyrium, *parandis* and scarves in colours of a peacock's feathers. Her man loved her and she admired him. She loved his looks—strong; muscular, dark, and quite handsome—and his moustache—thick, curved, pointed at both the ends. In those days, men didn't address their wives by their names. And women, they hardly ever spoke to their men. They just listened.

One night, Basanti heard her man calling her by the name that was her cognomen at her parents' house.

'Baso.' He'd mumbled.

And she'd felt the ground being swept from under her feet. Her cheeks flushed. Her palpitation rose. She felt a strong arm around her waist. A hard, calloused palm over her abdomen. Hot breath over her neck. And a face, she loved so much, looming over her own. The face inched closer, the moustache brushing against her cheeks, her lips. She was numb, motionless, when his tongue prised open her jaws, clenched with fear and excitement.

She bore him two sons, two healthy boys just like their father. She'd carry his food to field where he'd be working. Some *maadi daka*, stewed bottle-gourd stems and leaves, some salt, and a chilly or an onion—all tied up nicely in a clean *gamchha*. She carried the bundle on her head, and the two children would scamper along, grabbing every opportunity to splash around in the muddy water. In the mornings they played with their father, at nights their mother fed them with her wonderful stories. The older son was just nine when Basanti was widowed. She was so shocked she couldn't even cry. She had to look after her sons, their animals, their farm. There was no time to shed tears.

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Basanti received several propositions, mostly from her deceased husband's much-married cousins who materialized from nowhere and began claiming his things as their own. Basanti knew their intentions, she said a stern no. But her gullibility made her lose much of their farmland and two cows. She was left only with a small patch of land behind her hut. Small, but fertile. She began growing vegetables. She sold her produce in the *haat* and the small town on the other side of the railway tracks. The *haat* brought back memories of her days as a married woman. But she couldn't wear coloured glass bangles or saris any more. And she'd lost all fascination for sweets and steam engines.

She also gathered *tendu* and *sal* leaves, *mahua* blossoms and bamboo shoots for which she got a fair price in the market. At times, she worked at building and road construction sites and also found a job at the rice-mill in the town.

Survival was the first thing in Basanti's mind. She survived everything. Hunger, poverty, scheming relatives, and salacious leers. The gritty tribal widow proved herself a quintessential single mother, nurturing her fatherless sons, unaided, not once making them feel deprived or desperate. Her sons grew up into able-bodied young men, too busy oiling their own machines. Not at all like their father. Not a hint of affection, nor a modicum of gratitude. They'd married girls of their own choice. And that was, perhaps, the beginning of Basanti's woes.

One would've envied Basanti's life. Two sons, two daughters-in-law, grandchildren. Complete family, isn't it? One only had to skim the smile swimming over Basanti's physiognomy to learn what the woman was actually going through. A lifetime of struggle and toil had hardened not only her limbs but also her soul. She realised her sons and their wives didn't want her around so she built herself a one-room hut in the same small patch of land where she used to grow vegetables. That was where she cooked, slept and lived.

Her daughters-in-law were lazy wenches, and very, very aggressive. Basanti failed to conciliate with their slovenly manners and unpredictable mood swings. She often pointed out their shortcomings. She doted on her three grandchildren who were often ill-fed, dirty and whining, all thanks to their mothers' ineptitude at running their families. The children would constantly run to their grandmother who cared for them more than their mothers did, and this was something Basanti's daughters-in-law couldn't bear to see.

The older son had two children—a son and a daughter. The younger one had only a son. The younger son's child had a bout of diarrhoea and succumbed to the ailment. While the child was alive (and suffering),

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it was Basanti who attended to him. His mother's role was limited to yelling and blaming all and sundry for her child's sickness.

Once the child died, the yelling rose in intensity. And so did the blaming. The daughters-in-law, quite surprisingly, lost no moment in declaring that their mother-in-law was to be held responsible for the child's death.

Basanti was stunned. What has she done? Why are they blaming her?

'Tell us, what you do inside your hut?' Her sons questioned her. 'Which evil gods you worship and how many children do you need for your sacrifices?'

Basanti was flabbergasted. She couldn't believe her ears. Such queries meant only one thing—they thought she practised black-magic. That she was a *witch*. But *her* sons putting such a blame on her? *Her* sons calling her a witch?

She felt utterly helpless. The last time she'd felt so dejected was when she'd been widowed. She had no one to turn to. Two small children. How would she raise them?

The same helplessness gripped her again.

'What are you saying?' was all that rolled out of her frail, parched lips.

And with desolation, she watched her sons ransack her one-room hut. Her utensils, her clothes, her clay pots, her tin box, everything was thrown out. Not satisfied with all the damage he'd caused to his mother's hut, and heart, the younger son pulled Basanti's hair and threw her on the ground. Then he kicked her, straight on the abdomen. The old woman screamed, holding her stomach.

The sons went on hurling abuses, and kicks. The fleshy refuge—where Basanti had housed both her fiendish sons for nine months each—was badly battered, perhaps as a castigation—meted out by the sons themselves—for nurturing such imprudent and inhumane children. The older son, in the meanwhile, was preparing to demolish his mother's fragile dwelling. One hard blow of the hatchet and the bamboo door came off. Another blow, and the wooden panels of the make-shift kitchen were gone. Another blow, the clay *chulha* was gone.

This went on for a long time. The wives, lamenting the death of the child and goading their husbands to *kill* the old witch, stood huddled—proliferating their ostentatious grief and mutual wickedness by holding on to each other. Many villagers gathered to witness the *tamasha* but hardly anyone stepped forward to speak on behalf of Basanti, doubled up on the ground in pain, grief, shock and humiliation. Belief in magic

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had stronger roots than acceptance of the words of an old hag. Plus, the hag was too proud to solicit any aid from anyone, whether neighbour or kin.

Basanti lay there—in the embryo position, like she'd once been inside her mother's womb—for a long time. Legs curved, palms caressing the stomach. Where is her mother? She longed for her soothing voice—*Baso! Baso!*—and her Utopian tales with unconditional happy endings. She longed for her man—she'd laugh and tell him, look what your sons did to me. You buy me a new sari, some glass bangles, some collyrium, some vermilion, and I'll look beautiful once again.

It was dark when Basanti began retrieving her things from the rubble. She picked up a few clothes and the souvenirs of her youth—a few intact glass bangles and her tiny (and empty) *sindoor* and *kajal* boxes—and wrapped them into a bundle in a dirty *dhoti*. Then she left.

A two-hour train journey brought Basanti to the Copper Town railway station. She alighted from the compartment looking like a madwoman. Two nights on the platform, and on the third day she caught the eye of Soren *babu*.

Soren *babu* wasn't a relative, but he knew, and remembered, Basanti, and her robust singing and socializing he'd experienced at a wedding they both had attended. A little talk, and the story came out. Soren *babu* knew Basanti quite well, well enough to bring her home without harbouring any doubts. And that was what he did.

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Pushpa wakes up, expecting Baso *mai* to appear from the kitchen holding a broom.

'I'd told you not to do these things.' She rehearses the lines before pushing the kitchen door open. Baso *mai* isn't there. Where's she?

Pushpa is alarmed. Soren *babu* jumps out of the bed and throws a wind-cheater around himself. The children run out into the courtyard. The front door has been left open. But where is Baso *mai*?

Pushpa notices. The corner where Baso *mai* used to sleep. The camp-cot was open, up on its legs. On it, were neatly arranged, all the clothes and other nitty-gritty—comb, oil, *sal* twigs for cleaning the teeth, soap—that Baso *mai* had received from the Soren family. Her rubber *chappals* were there on the floor but her own humble bundle was gone. Baso *mai* was gone.

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Glossary

1. *aanchaar* - Santhali word for 'pallu' or the end of the sari.
2. *baahu* - Santhali word of address for one's daughter-in-law.
3. *babu* - the Indian term of respect used for a man.
4. *chappals* - Indian term for slippers or flip-flops.
5. *chulha* - Indian word for a clay oven.
6. *dhoti* - loincloth, could also be worn by women as a sari.
7. *diku* - Santhali word, meaning foreigner or outsider.
8. *gamchha* - a brightly coloured handloom cloth having several uses.
9. *haat* - marketplace in tribal regions of Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal and Orissa.
10. *jamun* - sweet, purple-coloured berry.
11. *jhi* - Santhali word of address for one's father's sister.
12. *kajal* - collyrium.
13. *Ma* - mother, here used for the goddess Durga, often addressed as Mother by all those who worship her.
14. *maadi daaka* - Santhali term for cooked, unstrained rice.
15. *machi* - Santhali word for a low-stool made of wood and grass fibres.
16. *mai* - mother. The word *mai* could also be used to respectfully address an elderly woman.
17. *mirchi patakha* - a small, cylindrical cracker.
18. *muri* - Bengali / Santhali word for puffed rice eaten as a snack.
19. *Nidhi Kulpati and Debang* - well-known newsreaders on the Hindi news-channel NDTV India. *Nidhi Kulpati and Debang spoke so softly...* means that the television in the Sorens' house was played at a very low volume.
20. *parandi* - ornamental dressing for women's hair, usually tied to the plaits.
21. *puja* - worship. Saraswati *puja* means the celebrations associated with the worshipping of Goddess Saraswati.
22. *Shahrukh, Rani, Preity* - Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee and Preity Zinta, three of Bollywood's most popular stars. Pushpa didn't allow music and entertainment in the house after she begins suspecting Baso *mai*.
23. *sil lodha* - Santhali term for a grindstone.
24. *sindoor* - vermilion, worn only by married Indian women.

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The Cost of Living

Mamta Anand

Anu was a PGT teacher in Vihar Group of Schools. Hailing from a middle class family, her husband Krishna was a junior employee in MTNL. Anu had only two things in her life—home and office. Getting a job in the corporate world's best name was not an easy affair for Anu. Her interview board was much impressed by her effective planning and found her to be suitable for the job of a teacher in class IX and XI. She was told that on the basis of her performance she would be given Board classes after a year.

Anu who had studied with excellent academic results in a small town of Akola thought that to be competent to teach in Mumbai she would need extra awareness and preparation. Being excited with her new job she fondly celebrated the achievement with her husband and kids, Sri and Charu, dreaming of a better future.

Anu's first day in school gave her a mixed impression of opportunity and submission to authority. She came to know that to be a teacher she had to learn to be a junior, a subordinate and a jack of all trades. Anu, like so many others working in offices, understood that most of the time she may have to be someone she would not want to be.

Her first experience of reality came when she was teaching Class IX about the victory of Shivaji. She was teaching in an absorbing manner, explaining to her students the heroism of Shivaji. One student asked her, "Was Shivaji's fight with Aurangzeb a fight for victory or was it a fight for freedom?"

She answered; "Shivaji loved freedom and understood that in the reign of Aurangzeb only a fight for victory could guarantee freedom." Just then a peon came in and informed her that the Principal wanted to speak to her after the class. As the class was over Anu went straight to the Principal's office. She found Mr. Pradhan and Ms Kapila already

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waiting to see the Principal. In anxious curiosity she asked them if every thing was all right. They said that it was something in the normal course. The Principal called them over and handed them a shopkeeper's visiting card. The well-known shop was seven kilometres away from the school. He said, "The ladies of the management have selected a grade of shoes for the students' uniform. You three go there and bargain over the price and ensure a discount."

Anu, feeling slightly reluctant about the whole thing, did not react to the instructions of the Principal, as Ms Kapila and Mr. Pradhan did to please him with a responsive, "Yes Sir." Entrusting their classes to adhoc teachers, they left for the shop. The shopkeeper Mr. Chaganlal greeted the teachers in a suave manner and showed them the shoes. He said the shoes gave extra power and grip to the runners. Anu simply asked her seniors, "Did the children go for hiking?" "Sometimes," said Mr. Pradhan, "these are for the general uniform." "But," Anu said, "they are very heavy for everyday use." This made the shopkeeper say, "You are right, madam. I told the school management people that these shoes are not right for children. They are too heavy on the feet and also on the budget of parents."

"How much do they cost?" asked Anu. "Rs. 1300/- madam."

Anu, shocked, left the shoes on the floor and clasped her hands murmuring. "How in this poor country can parents bear the expense of five uniforms for a week and such expensive shoes." The shopkeeper appreciated the concern of Anu and sympathised with the parents. Anu did not wish to bargain at all. Ms Kapila and Mr. Pradhan struck the deal for a Rs.300 discount. Anu was resolved to speak to the Principal. Ms Kapila said, "That was too much of confidence that you showed Ms. Anu. How can you speak against the Management?" Anu said politely, "I only want to put up the case of poor parents." Ms. Kapila said, "Ha! You better try."

On their return, seeing the excitement of the Principal to know about the deal, Anu kept mum. Ms Kapila, in a reassuring voice, said, "Yes Sir, we have made a successful bargain."

At home Anu discussed the case with her husband. Krishna valued her opinion but advised her not to open her mouth. At this Anu simply cried. "But I am a teacher Krish." He said, "Better forget that. You are only a junior employee Anu, remember just that."

In the morning, while dressing up her children, Anu felt a strong urge to ensure justice for the hapless parents. The Principal was the ultimate caretaker of the children, she thought and made up her mind to speak to him. She walked upto the Principal's office.

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Seeing her, the principal at once asked her, "Have you been introduced to the staff Anu?" She replied, "I have come to know about my department Sir." She further spoke in a lowered tone, "Sir in my opinion the shoes are too expensive for the middle class children." "That's their parents problem Anu, why are you worried," said the Principal obstinately. "We can not stop our progress because of them; if the school is unaffordable for them, let them take their children out. It won't matter to the institution at all."

Suddenly Anu realised that she had nothing to say. She took leave of the Principal and retreated.

Over the weeks Anu saw how reluctantly did the students submit themselves to the overpowering authorities. For sometime, Anu felt despondent. But this was not to remain with her for long. Duty pulled her back.

Anu slowly grew fond of the students and she spent much of her time with them. Many treated her as their confidant and often shared their family problems with her; that gave them the much needed confidence and comfort.

At the earliest opportunity, Anu would be with the students. Knowing about life from them was often exciting to her. She ventured out with them to explore the world. She surfed the Internet with them, organised group discussions and arranged elocution competitions for them.

In comparison to this bright world of youngsters, Anu did not find much company among the staff. Mrs. Shinde confessed that being a teacher meant a lost career to her. Miss Parthasarathy was usually found dejected and believed she could not prove herself and couldn't get anything better than being a teacher.

Anu strongly felt that she had to change the mindset of her colleagues because she had no promising prospects herself, except her devotion and respect for the teaching job. This however did not find much of credence in the staff room. Some among the teachers like Ms Kapila, Ms Isha and Ms Parmar spent time in making their fortunes by being the favourites of the management.

Mr. Arya, the Executive Chairman, took good note of the new teacher Anu's popularity and planned to get a feedback on the teachers from the students to encourage teachers to perform better. Anu's colleagues who did their duty without any element of sincerety clearly saw their boats in troubled waters. They knew a good deal about Anu's fine influence among the students and thought that too much of a difference in feedback on them and Anu could cause problems. The management may simply think of them to be less worthy and give more consideration to Anu.

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Anu was like a river of knowledge for the willing students and taught them whenever they found time. Mr. Arya found from the feedbacks on Anu that the students boldly made, that they enjoyed coming to school because of Anu Madam. Mr. Arya praised Anu and even the Principal congratulated her. This sent jitters to her colleagues who now turned into adversaries.

Foremost among them, Ms Kapila and Mr. Pradhan, started taking regular rounds to check what Anu did in the students' groups. They talked to the children who sang of her success.

The academic session was to end and Anu's official reports suggested her marvellous progress as a teacher. Her innovative approach was deeply appreciated. Anu herself did not keep it a secret that she believed in a traditional style of education where students lived with their teachers. To the staff she said, "I wish to give more time to the students."

The academic session ended on a memorable note for Anu as the students gave vivid accounts of her devotion to teaching and love for students. Many eager students of the senior classes aspired for the brightest careers.

Krishna felt proud of his wife for all her hard work, involvement and devotion to the students. Celebrating her success he told Anu, "My dear, I love you for your great achievement. It may not have been rewarded by money but you see a good name is everything in life and I am happy to see that you have earned it in a big way."

The family planned for a summer trip to the hill station Matheran.

Just a day before they were to leave for the trip, Anu was called to the school. When she met the Principal he told her, "You would be re-appointed for the next session only if you can prove yourself to be not guilty of charging money from students for your group activities as this seriously amounts to breaking of the school rules." Anu was moved to tears. She said, "Sir this is someone's mischief. I have myself always paid for the programmes of the group." The Principal simply told her to present the case in front of the management within six days or someone else would be appointed in her place.

In a highly exasperated mood Krishna returned their tickets for the trip to Matheran. Disgusted, he told his wife, "Do not report back to those wicked people who have treated you so badly. Stay at home, don't go for the job. I can never understand why this happens with you." Sobbing, Anu tried to explain to Krishna. "How can I run away like this? Especially when they have levelled charges against me? I have to defend myself. And prove that I was always worthy of their confidence."

"Whose confidence, Anu? And how does it matter after this case?"

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said Krishna in a stern voice. "Do whatever you like. But just stop this crying and don't bring this school nuisance home. I don't like it. I am going to the office."

On the first day of the presentation of her case to the management Anu was shown the charges made against her. A group of senior teachers under Mr. Pradhan and Ms Kapila had reported to the management that they received written complaints from the students against Anu accusing her of taking money from them for the group activities.

Anu at once refuted the charges as completely false and malicious. She demanded the students to be present during the hearing of the case. To this, the management objected and said, "It is not good to bring children here; they may be just afraid of you and may not speak up. We are representing them." Having no choice, Anu openly challenged the authorities to either prove the charges or acquit her.

The management asked her to meet them after three days with enough proof in her defense. After three days Anu brought attested copies of the statements made in her favour by the students who attended her group regularly. Some students also appeared in support of their Anu Madam. The management recorded the statements and sent the students away. Later, they informed Anu that her teaching programme was very much liked by the authorities and that it shall be made into a permanent course from the current session. Among the selected senior staff who were to monitor it were Ms Kapila, Ms Isha and Mr. Pradhan. Giving no details about her case they advised her to concentrate on her classes and subject herself to seniors in the preliminary years of her teaching career. She was also told that if she wished so, she could apply again for the job.

Anu told her husband about the wrenching moments she faced and the unjust decision of the authorities. Krishna despondently said, "Why does this happens to you, Anu? Why so much of pain for the good work?" "That's the cost of living," said Anu. "A measure of the spirit."

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The Social Syndrome

Manohar Bandopadhyay

Living in perfect anonymity in our newly built house in a new colony always upset Geeta. She blamed me for this alienation as she did for all petty things since our marriage. That Sunday she rather caught me on my nerves. "The folks here mock at us that we aren't social," she proceeded. "The maid servant has been all along hinting at the gossip floating around about us. They say we are quite cussed people, putting on airs all the time, saying not even 'hello' to a neighbour," she reminded.

As I put aside the newspaper to listen to her, Geeta fervently pleaded with me to mix with the people around. I only wondered why she couldn't break the ice and blaze the trail for me. But seldom do I reason with her for fear of unwelcome storm and quite willingly therefore, yielded to her exhortation. I fixed up the afternoon to call on some neighbours and make a solemn beginning for the demolitions of all wrong notions about us.

We were having a fresh round of tea after watching the *Mahabharata* serial, quite upset at the brutal slaughter of Abhimanyu, when the gate-bell rang. A baldy, weazen face of around forty peeped over the iron gate. Without even waiting for anyone to respond, he. opened the gate and crossing over the lawn ushered himself into the drawing room which was in any case already open.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," I returned heartily and looked into his eyes. The fellow gave criminal look.

"We live in the corner house of this street, just straight right from here," he introduced himself without mentioning his name. Any way, finding quite a social neighbour before me, I cursed my knowledge about criminology. I was in fact excited. We had just resolved to visit a neighbour, and here the merciful God had sent one at once. I urged him gratefully

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to be seated and feel at home. He soon tiptoed to the sofa and threw his bulk down so heavily that I feared he may sink into the tender structure if the joints failed to hold.

"Would you be pleased to have a cup of tea," I implored.

"No. Thanks. I would rather have a smoke," he appeared quite informal on his own and didn't wait for my acquiescence. He picked up my Oxford packet and lighted a cigarette. Bloating his cheeks, he shut his eyes for a while and threw out a gale of smoke.

He talked less and sought to know more about us. In a moment he ascertained where I worked, where we had come from to this new colony, if we were familiar with the locality, why we were an issueless couple and so on.

"Do you mind if I use your telephone?" He cut me short when I strove to enquire about him. Those days telephone connections were scarce. We were the only lucky family in the entire street to have this facility.

"Not the least," I assured.

The man dialled a number and said "Hello". The sound on the other end perhaps abruptly ceased for he soon pressed the receiver button and dialled again. This time he landed on a wrong number, I presumed since he dialled a number again. In this last attempt some one on the other end seemingly responded and suggested another number for which our visitor thanked him and noted on the pad lying by the instrument. He dialled the new number but the line seemed to be busy. He showed no patience however and went on dialling furiously several times finding it busy at each effort. He unleashed his wrath on the poor instrument and vehemently cursed the telephone department. After about fifteen minutes of his fierce duel, he finally succeeded to get the number he wanted. He then gave a toothful smile.

An argument ensued bargaining over some rates. From the talks it seemed our great visitor was a property dealer and was wrangling with the seller of a plot. After persuasion for a couple of minutes, he threw the receiver with a loud bang. I thought it was the end of the show and heaved a sigh of relief. But the elusive relief soon subsided. The fellow took out a pocket diary. He searched for a number and located one. He then swung his fingers on the dial and gleamed with impetuous pleasure as he finally caught his target. The speaker on the other end seemed to be the buyer of the plot. Our visitor impressed upon him that the rates were soaring pretty high each day and if he opted out, it would be disastrous. He threatened him that there were a few more buyers of the same plot. The trick seemed to have worked

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since our visitor thanked him beamingly and advised him to reach him with advance money immediately. He then rose on his feet.

"I am in a hurry. Shall call on sometime next week," he said as he stepped out thrusting the diary into his pocket.

"Please do," I said. There was no escape.

"But you too must visit our home. You see, we are very social," he said turning back.

"Certainly, of course," I said and noticed that he was already on the street without taking any formal leave.

Geeta, who had been till then watching the scene, stared at me and growled," How selfish!"

"Perhaps he was in a hurry," I attempted to calm her down.

"Is it the way to make one's first visit to anyone's house? I say, the fellow seems to be a scoundrel. I shall turn him right away if he ever again steps in." She was furious. I thought she was being a little too harsh. But before I could make any comment the doorbell disrupted.

A charming, tall lady in graceful adulation walked in with two kids, one sauntering behind and the other hanging on by her *kameez*, pounding his head intermittently on her hips.

"Namesteji," she folded her hands and flashed out her thick coated lips. Geeta tiptoed to greet her. She fondled the kids and brought the visitor in. She was rather restless till the visitor was well seated. The visitor looked around and wiped the sweat out of her creamy cheeks while her children busied themselves fiddling with the things. In a moment the lady apprised us of her family history and the location of her house. Then turning to Geeta she said: "How do you manage to keep yourself locked up in your house all day? Never saw you visiting anyone's house. Don't you feel really choked?"

"We will visit yours now that you have made a beginning," Geeta assured.

"We look forward to it eagerly. We all live here with each other's support, you see." She gave a brief smile. I noticed there was a mole between her chin and the cheek that made her face all the more beautiful. Geeta was overjoyed that a woman's get-together would be held in her house on the first Sunday every month. Geeta offered to prepare tea to which the gracious lady politely protested and rather begged to leave. The kids were already scampering out on the lawns. I observed her leaving too soon upset Geeta. But there was no help for the lady was already on the door-step.

Geeta thanked her profusely for her precious visit and promised to call on her on the get-together day without fail. The lady then turned back and moved closer to Geeta, twisting her *dupatta* by her forefinger.

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"*Bahinji,*" she said in her thin voice almost whispering, "can you spare your cooking cylinder? I hope to get the supply in three or four days when I'll return yours."

Geeta looked at me helplessly. Our cylinder was on its fag-end and could go off any day. I could read her predicament; it was difficult to disappoint the first lady visitor to our house, especially when we had been branded an un-social couple. Perhaps Geeta well reflected over the situation and took her resolve. Demurring for a while she agreed and made me drag the cylinder from the store to the front gate which left me gasping.

"Leave it over there, *bhaisahib* said the lady bringing some relief to me as I feared I might as well have to carry it all the way to her home. "My brother-in-law will come and take it home," she said and strode out without uttering a word of thanks for anyone's sacrifice. The 'brother-in-law' seemed to be hanging around there already since as soon as she vanished , the young man arrived at the gate and carried the cylinder over his shoulders.

"So this is where we are. Perhaps we are yet to learn how to be social," said I and waited for Geeta's reactions.

"Enough is enough. If anyone now calls seeking something, I'll just push him off the house," said Geeta in a frenzy of contempt and anger. "No use looking out to these people for social familiarity." I was glad that good sense at last prevailed on her. "So don't ever fret for being social any more, my dear," I counselled as I chuckled.

"Certainly," she agreed, "let us not be social on these terms at least."

"Never mind," I endeavoured to console her, "the lady will any way replace it shortly. Better, cook the meals now before any other intruder upsets us." I picked up a newspaper of which I had earlier read only the headlines in the morning and Geeta rushed to the kitchen. Suddenly I heard Geeta cursing her fate. The cylinder had run out.

"I thought it would last at least a week. But now I am undone," she moaned.

"Forget about it. We are vexed enough already," I said and suggested to go out to some *dhaba* to have meals. Geeta had now become wiser and didn't differ. "Yes let us get away before some one else swoops on us," she said.

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Lovers

Shinjini Kumar

Monisha runs her fingers through her hair, fluffing a few strands to frame her rounded cheeks. The ends of her hair feel wet and sharp over her transparent pink shirt and she begins to smooth them between her fingers, one at a time. She can remain preoccupied doing this for a long time, given that she has layers of black curls, cascading down her shoulders.

But Monisha has no concentration.

She plays with a few of the hair waves at a time and then goes back to her mobile, to play a ring tone, or peer into the picture gallery, at shots taken at the last work party.

While she looks busy doing all this, she keeps an eye on the crowd around her. It is beginning to get late and just a few families are left on the benches outside the ice cream parlor. There are still many young couples, married or unmarried, straight or gay, and groups of boys hanging out, with or without any ice creams, sodas, popcorn or freshly made pink and white candy floss balanced uneasily on thin, jagged sticks.

There are also a few unaccompanied men and women. Some of these women are so garishly made up that they scream their purpose for being here alone at night. Monisha is thankful for their presence. They will take on the kind of men that she would rather avoid and yet, because they are there, she has a chance of being approached.

This is not her first time. She has successfully hooked clients in this arcade before. She likes the cozy, family ambience in this rich neighborhood, which magically transforms itself into a pick up joint for those who want it to. If a man walks up to her and smiles, she has the choice of either talking into her phone and pretending to be waiting for her boyfriend, or smiling back and striking a deal. It is also much safer than standing in front of the five star hotels, where the whole scene is more obvious and may even be risky.

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In any case, Monisha does not care too much for the moneyed out-of-towner. Ditto for the clients she has managed to accompany through her 'friend' Shaheen at the fitness center. Shaheen is the one who originally floated this idea to her. It was a revolting idea at first, but it had refused to leave Monisha. She found herself thinking about it more and more in the days after she broke up with Johny, or rather, was dumped by him in favor of Divya, the flavor of that season at the Call Center where she worked then.

Of course, such things happen and there is no reason for Monisha to take it to heart, but then she does. She can forgive Johny for his good taste in opting for what is fresher, younger and therefore better. But she also finds, tragically, that she cannot forget. She still wants to go back to tickling the back of Johny's ears with the ends of her hair, to run her plump fingers over his smooth chest and to croon tuneless songs to him after they have just made love.

Monisha does not like to think too much about that first time, where Shaheen arranged everything, the client, the place and the price. Nor about the second time or the third or the most recent time, when one of the men she had been out with had called her to refer a friend. As if she were a doctor – a sex doctor, a prescription, a treatment, a fee and a satisfied customer referring others! It had been an easy outing, the referred friend being heavy in his valet and light in his libido.

Monisha never thinks of herself as a prostitute, but as someone who is there for the heck of it and will walk out as soon as she finds a stable relationship, on her terms, at her will.

Just as she never thinks of herself as an intermittent call centre executive, like those other girls at her last office, jabbering in their funky American accents, dressed in cut off jeans and noodle strap tops, a size too small for their coke and beer laden bodies. Tolerating her co-workers is the worst part of Monisha's call centre job, that is, whenever she has one –effeminate Vaughan who is really Vikas, stupid Sandra, who is really Sunita, blonde-streaked Jessica who is really Jyotsna or even ambitious Natasha who is really Natasha.

The children at the ice cream and cotton candy stalls are now leaving, satiated and sleepy. The younger of them leave their bodies limp over the shoulders of their irritated fathers. Urchins, dressed in oversized rags, collect half eaten ice cream cones and burgers and beg for rupee coins with a strange combination of indifference and persistence. In time, they also slacken and begin herding in the spaces between shops and inside the ugly, dried up fountain. The more spirited ones make a dash to the parking lot in the day's last attempt at hitting a kind note and the welcome

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sight of a coin dropping out of the rolling glass, in their small, brown hands.

Some of the women with pointed eyebrows and painted cheeks have found clients and have taken them to the dark privacy of the benches at the backside of the shops. The 'family' crowd studiously avoids looking in that direction. Monisha is restless, but also amused that she looks respectable and distant enough to be unasked for two hours.

She thinks maybe she is early today. She has been in a good mood. One of the places where she applied for a position has called and wants her to interview next week. She has been out of a job for nearly a month.

Monisha loves being without a job and break the monotony of attending to complaining customers from across the time zones. Yet, it is inevitable that she should apply for and interview and find a job. Just as it has been inevitable that she should have studied aimlessly, listening to teachers who mostly looked like they were suffering from gas, inevitable that she had to drop out after Baba died, inevitable that Indian BPOs hired her in a sequence of inanity, to pay her for assuming pseudonyms of Maggy, Margaret, Monica, and listening to frustrated callers, inevitable that after Johny, she can make no friend, keep no job and find no decent accommodation for more than six months at a time.

This evening, she had felt a desire to go out with someone intimate, to just blow smoke rings or sit hand in hand till the world destroyed itself around them. After Johny, she has met no one with whom she can do that. She often marvels if it is her new life as a hooker that's meddling with her luck.

Monisha does not want to take that train of thought or she will neither have a relationship, nor the kick that she gets out of picking and choosing men to have sex with and get paid for it. It is well past ten in the night and she wants to give up. There is a lot that she can do with a few thousand bucks, but if it does not have to happen here and now, maybe she will try another place, another time. The spring breeze in her wet hair makes her feel drowsy and blank, just like that moment when sleep takes over.

The crowd is invariably sauntering towards the parking. She likes to watch them and feels anxious when someone returns her glance or stares at her. A young man in a fine silk *kurta* catches her attention, partly for his graceful manner, but largely for the awkwardness with which he tries to pace himself with a dainty looking woman in an expensive *lehanga*. The pretty woman bears her palms out, in front of her crystal-encrusted blouse, in shades of flame, to air the freshly painted henna on them.

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The man is handsome and his clothes suit him, but he looks uncomfortable for the attention that his companion attracts, caressing his shoulder and chest with her velvet cheeks to take small licks out of his big waffle cone, filled with scoops of vanilla ice cream, topped with nuts and chocolate sauce.

The display makes Monisha angry. As usual, she feels bitter at the indecent haste that young, rich and handsome men show to get married! Someone can wait for her-Monisha, the plump-hipped, wavy haired, Durga-eyed goddess of sex, hanging out with her cell phone and almost on the verge of her thirtieth birthday!!! She has a wicked desire to walk up to the man and put her arms around his neck, letting her bosom press against the embroidered silk. That would shut out the even teethed, carefree smile of the woman, in true Hindi film style!

She knows she cannot do that, but it does not prevent her from staring idiotically at the man. The couple passes by her and moves far into the parking. Angry tears rise in Monisha's eyes at her ruined evening. She wants to go back to her hostel, to sulk, to shred her wardrobe to bits for not making her look half as pretty as the bride with the henna, to eat a dinner of red hot potato chips and stale, white bread, and to try and sleep, forever.

But this time, she really gets a phone call. It is her mother. In her irritableness, Monisha does not want to take the call, but she knows how much her mother will persist with the re-dial button. While she is still assuring her mother that she is back to her hostel and ready to fall asleep, she spots the handsome man in the silk *kurta* walk back towards the fountain.

Monisha expects that he has come back to collect something his lady has left behind in her happy carelessness. But the man is in no hurry to return. He looks around, much more confident and comfortable than he had seemed capable of. After a while of loitering with the loony cows and the stray couples getting cozy on the benches, he sits on one of the empty benches and lights a cigarette.

Monisha is tempted to just stand there and wait. In an uncanny way, she feels that he has come back for her. She is amused with her preposterous silliness, but then, on an impulse, she walks up to the bench and asks, "May I?" The man motions towards the emptiness next to him and she takes it.

"Are you waiting for someone?" the man asks with what sounds like genuine middle class concern at seeing a girl out at night in the unsafe city of Delhi.

"No, not really. Are you?" Monisha questions right back.

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He seems surprised and also somewhat relieved, she thinks. It is a good sign. She goes on, "I'm Monisha."

"I'm Anuj. I thought you were waiting for someone. I've seen you here since evening."

Monisha finds the solicitousness disgusting. She has a strong urge to upset the rich and cute Mama's boy, who obviously knows nothing about the world of the likes of Monisha. She is torn between a strong physical longing to continue sitting there with the warmth of his body next to hers and an equally strong repulsion to his casual dignity, which reminds her of Baba's 'real' sons. They were dignified. They had not spoken a single bad word but managed to send Maa away before the relatives gathered for the last rites of Baba.

It was Monisha who had used foul language. Stinking words that Maa had wondered aloud where her daughter could have learnt them. Only her roommates at the cheap Mukherjee Nagar apartment had understood, surprised that she had to receive her mother, in stead of leaving with her packed bags to go and cry at her Baba's funeral.

She has never seen the men that her mother had refused to confront, preferring to escape to her sister's untidy hole in Asansol.

The fresh recollection of the weak, dying voice of her mother over long distance phone goads Monisha to fly at this incarnation of middle-class smugness in his face. She spits the words defiantly,

"Yes, I've been here since evening trying to find a client. I'm a hooker...on an unlucky day, maybe."

Monisha peers into the handsome face, expecting to find shock and discomfort. She is disappointed to discern a whiff of a smile.

"I thought so too. I'm not surprised." Anuj replies almost braggingly. This is too much. It makes Monisha angrier.

"So, he thinks I look like a whore!"

She wants to retort with a pointed barb. But suddenly, she senses that his supposed composure has left him. That would count for victory. She has scored a point over him. One...love.

Monisha laughs, drawing attention from the few couples still remaining in the arcade. She jiggles her breasts, thrusting them closer to him and asks invitingly,

"So, what do you say?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm getting married day after tomorrow."

Monisha has already seen the ice-cream licking, sexy wife-to-be with the perfect cleavage and long, delicate fingers with henna patterns on them. She feels a sharp pain stab her chest from inside. Her attempt at sounding surprised comes out with more irony that she intends,

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"And what am I doing with the groom-to-be? Will your wife like to know that day after tomorrow?"

The indifference in his voice surprises both as Anuj carries on the conversation,

"I'm the luckiest man in the world to have a woman like Shalini. Why do you think I'd ever have to prove myself? But certainly, I'd not like to spend the night here on the bench. Would you?"

Anuj gets up, throwing the remains of the unsmoked cigarette under the bench. Without thinking, Monisha is up on her feet and the two walk together to the metallic grey Ford, one of the few cars still parked outside. When Anuj invites Monisha to sit with him, his intention and Monisha's guess is that he will drop her to the working women's hostel where she lives.

But they end up at a pub, partly because Monisha has not eaten her dinner and Anuj needs a drink.

There is no reason for Anuj to lay bare the story of his life to a complete stranger. But he dreads the idea of going back to his plush Gurgaon apartment to be by himself. Going to the Vasant Vihar bungalow where his father-in-law has housed all his relatives from Dalhousie will necessitate explanations about where he has been all this while.

And he wants to talk. To share his life with someone with no interest in it, someone with the large, pensive eyes of Monisha, who appears to be in no hurry to get anywhere. Which is so refreshing after the last few days of his life, where each wedding ritual, the invitations with the silver Ganesha sitting atop a saffron envelope, the Sangeet, and the Mehandi have been planned with clockwork precision. The streaming guests and back slapping new relatives of Anuj have all been in a hurry to make his acquaintance and then move on to the scotch whiskey and cocktails to relax themselves with each other. No matter how much he has tried, Shalini's relatives continue to find him, well, a little odd and dull.

Maybe it has to do with his brilliant career. At least that's what Shalini has told him. Shalini's side comprises generally of moneybags, traders of Chinese silk, Australian kiwifruits, European chocolates, imported cosmetics or cheap local ones in fake packaging, Brazilian coffee, Darjeeling tea, pan masala, franchisees of various multinational companies in India and brokers of one kind or another, making really big supply deals at home and abroad and even bigger profits. In this crowd, Anuj stands out for his resume that boasts of the best that can be achieved with hard work and sheer intellectual grit, degrees from IIT and IIM, excellent grades and jobs at salaries he can quote for himself.

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Anuj begins to talk without a prologue,

"When I was fifteen, I left the hills for the first time...to join a prestigious school in Delhi, where I could get the right training and attitude for qualifying in the IIT entrance. It really wasn't as difficult as we had assumed it to be, but well, I spent two years of scorching summers in Delhi trying to overcome my homesickness with sheer ambition."

Monisha is mesmerized by the post midnight loneliness of the pub with its display of goblets and glasses and the shining steel and purple décor. Not the most happening pub in town maybe! But she is enjoying the clam salad with her drink, which Anuj has ordered for her. He goes on,

"After that it became a habit. I don't think I ever questioned why I was doing this, or whether I really could have done anything else. But sometimes, when I stay at these expensive hotels around the world and get served by people of different color, I wonder if I would have really enjoyed myself being a cook and a bartender, like Daddy."

The last part seems to connect well with the aimlessness of Monisha's own life. She is interested, even though sleep is claiming her over. She tries to listen attentively,

"My daddy was a cook and bartender at a hotel in Dalhousie. He belonged to a village nearby and had no formal training in what he did, having worked his way up from the kitchen in the same hotel. When I was small, I used to love to go to the kitchen and watch him, mixing drinks and putting finishing touches on dishes, just before they were served. In the lean tourist season, he also went back to the kitchen to wear an apron and cap and cook.

He retired himself after I bought a house for them and a shop where mom wanted to sell curios to the tourists. But I think it was one of my least successful consulting assignments, because Daddy just hates having to sit behind the cash counter, waiting to count notes and hand out receipts and swipe and re-swipe credit cards. Mom thinks it more prestigious than being a cook and she really likes the attention she attracts behind the counter, wearing half of her stock on her person." Monisha fuzzily thinks how nice it would be to hear the rest of the story after they make love and she is nestling inside his arm. She fantasizes about whether he has a hairy or hairless chest. She tries to guess if the man will take her to bed eventually. Meanwhile, Anuj continues,

"I feel sorry for my Dad. You should have seen him with Shalini's relatives at the *mehandi* this evening. Poor chap, he was so defensive and out-of-place, unlike Mom, who loaded herself with jewelry and flirted with the rich men like she was born in their class. Everyone finds her

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naiveté very charming. Everyone, except me. Its so depressing. You should see the way Shalini and Mom patronize each other!

Shalini is extremely graceful. I'm addicted to her myself ever since I met her at a disco two years ago. She never makes me feel like I don't belong to her world, but I wish she did. Maybe I'd accept that better. I know she loves me, loves the little country boy lost in the big city, whom she can pamper and soothe and show off. I am unfair enough to think that it gives her a kick to keep the wound festering...Sometimes I feel that I can see myself with my wrists split open and blood congealed all around me, but then I am given to exaggeration and drama..."

Monisha inwardly agrees that he is being dramatic. She quietly sympathizes with Shalini for having to cope with the difficult person that reside inside the soft-spoken, caring lover allowing licks from his double waffle cone. And yet, she wants to cry herself to look at Anuj's stubbornly adolescent face.

He has not asked her anything. Anyway, she does not want to talk. The more she hears about him, the more resolute she feels about not telling her story. The pub is almost deserted by now. They will have to leave at any moment.

She feels quite definite about there being no upcoming sex or money, but she is in no hurry to go back. She really wants to hear more about Dalhousie from Anuj. She touches his arm lightly, a brush devoid of passion or sensuousness, and asks him to talk about his childhood if he wants to.

"We lived in the small house behind the hotel, a level below the kitchen, with a green tin roof. The hotel itself had four blocks of red roofed buildings, three with beautifully carpeted suites, the fourth housing the bar and restaurant. The restaurant had floor-to-ceiling glass windows and one could see right up to Lahore on a clear day. I was not allowed to loiter around these buildings or to play with the tourist children. They were rich children, from Delhi, Meerut, Kolkata, Mumbai and sometimes from other countries."

The waiter brings the bill and Anuj settles it. As he goes through the motion of taking out his card, signing the card slip, adding a generous tip and walking towards the lift, he keeps talking about his childhood. As if by pouring it out to a stranger, he will be able to release himself from it forever, to begin a new life with Shalini the day after, purged and renewed. So that when her whisky-and-soda uncles and Champaign-on-ice aunts encircle him at the reception, he can hold his own and engage them with knowing talk about the stock market and the expectation of interest rates and diamonds on Madison Avenue and the bountiful Chinese

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markets, so that when they retire to relax among themselves, they will nod their heads and say, "what a fine boy our Shalini has chosen for herself."

So, he has to go on talking about his lost little world, with its narrow, vertical paths and unceremoniously flowering orchids on mossy, bumpy walls to this silent stranger. She is hearing him out keenly. Unlike Shalini, who invariably chatters to distract him or simply shut him up with mouthfuls of Estee Lauder and Revlon kisses. It makes no sense to Shalini that Anuj should actually want to revisit what she thinks was a nightmare – no one does that!

"Nor was I allowed to be seen on the terrace, where the tourists sat in cane chairs with heavy cushions and watched the distant hills, sipping drinks that Daddy prepared. Sometimes, the owner of the hotel, who lived in a beautiful old bungalow up the hill also came and sat there, to mix with the tourists and to taste the drinks and the food.

From my room below, where I would do my homework, I could see their little daughter, sitting cross legged, like a little lady, between her parents and drinking hot chocolate. I liked the symmetry of growth that she and I shared, maybe the only thing that we did.

Since I was not allowed on the hotel property, I had to take the narrow, curvy path at the back of the hotel to climb up to my school. She, dressed in grey and white, romped right through the hotel, sometimes eating an apple, at other times, adjusting her socks and tightening her shoe laces."

As they walk through the parking lot, Anuj wonders if Monisha's interest in his story is feigned, like her foreplay would be, if he were to pay for it. He asks,

"Have you ever been to the hills? I mean do you even understand what I've been talking about?"

Monisha ignores the sneer and forces a response, "Everyone goes to their own hills, don't they? Mine may not have been the same as yours, but please go on."

"As I grew up, I began to wait for her at the U-turn where the two paths met. We would share the road for a while. Then, she took the straight road to her big school with pretty flowers in freshly painted, red pots and I took a road below to walk down to my shabby government school.

I thought she was much older than me, but I was a small built child and maybe she was not all that older. I believe she knew who I was and I did not have the courage to begin a conversation. I would wait for her to appear from the hotel lobby and then begin to walk,

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slowly, waiting for her to catch up. Then she would precede me and I would follow, pretending not to be looking at her. But I loved that part of the journey to school."

Anuj doesn't want to make any more guesses about her interest in his story. He has a vague feeling of having hired her for the job, even though the wages have not been negotiated, nor the terms of the job defined. He goes on,

"I guess I admired her for being the daughter of the owner, but also for the way she looked, huge eyes, thick eyebrows that almost joined at the center, rounded, smooth body and lots of black, wavy hair. On most days in summer, she left her hair open to dry before she reached school, where she would pause, forcing the black, silky curls through a broad, grey band before entering the school. As I grew up, I began to wait for that moment, hiding myself, just in case she turned back. But she never did.

On my first day in High School, I discovered that our dispersal time coincided. So, I would rush up and find her busily chatting with her friends or exchanging books, before she broke up and began walking down the road. It was easy to spot her with her curls and dusky, rich complexion among the other hill girls, with their smooth, pale skins and straight, boring hair. As I grew up, I fancied that she turned around, just before my little mud path downhill broke from her way to the hotel, and smiled at me. That was just my fancy, of course. When I was in ninth grade or so, I believe she passed school and I did not see her any more.

As a matter of fact, I did not see her at all after one uneventful afternoon of following her back from school. But how did I know that it would be my last day of walking on that road with her? It is funny that I have had such an exciting life after I left the hills, I love Shalini and I have been in love a few times in between, but that I should want to talk about that nameless girl tonight. Is there something about you that reminded me of her? Are you a Bengali?"

Monisha is quite bewildered.

The desire to score over the preppy, sophisticated man she had loved-hated at the arcade has left her completely. In any case, she is good at lying. She feels quite confident that years of bleaching her skin has made her fairer, dieting slimmer, and the hateful extra hair between the eyebrows have been tweezed away regularly ever since she joined college. Tying her hair in a small knot behind her, she replies, "Oh, no, I've lived in UP all my life. But how did you know that your girl was Bengali?" In fact Anuj does not mean what he has just said about the resemblance.

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He has merely been trying to justify telling her the story. Certainly, there is no resemblance, nor can there be between a dream and an afterthought. He feels a mild disgust at having opened himself. Maybe it is the time, the retreating stars and the impatient dawn. But he does not want to go on any more. Monisha has to repeat,

"You didn't tell me what happened...you needn't if you don't want to. Make a left turn after the speedbreaker. It's the red building on the right side."

As he changes the gear of the car, Anuj completes his story, just for the heck of it...for the beauty of the coming dawn...for Shalini, who will be the most stunning bride in the world...and for himself, to love her and to live in her arms, forever, framed on the wall, a timeless classic marriage...

"I finally had the guts to ask my mother about her when I got to IIT and felt carried away by what everyone made me feel was a remarkable success. I thought if I could see her, maybe I would just tell her that I had admired her and loved the way her hair fell on her school uniform, leaving dots of water from their wet edges. Maybe I would ask her if she had known all along that I followed her to school and waited for her at the fork in the road. Maybe we could both laugh it off as a silly, childhood memory.

But mom told me, in her slurpy, gossipy way that the shameless Bengali woman whom the owner of the hotel had kept for many years, even having a daughter with her, had been driven away by the real sons after his death. The poor wife, who had waited her time at her father's house in Simla, and she is supposed to be from a very rich family, had finally got her due and now owned the hotel. That was how it ended. And is this the right building for you? I'm sorry I forgot your name. I would like to remember it."

"Oh, Monica...that's my name. And thank you for the dinner. All the best."

Monisha barely finishes her greeting before turning to put the key in the side door of the house and disappears in the darkness. She can see with her hands and make it to her room so as to not disturb the sleeping girls in other rooms. Her throat feels parched and she pours herself some water from the tap. The water comes noisily, and in her head swims Dalhousie...Baba...hot chocolate in a large beer glass which she insisted upon, school uniform...grey skirt, white shirt in summer, grey pullover, jackets in winter, grey socks, broad grey hair band...mossy little pathways that parted from her road to school...big red tin roofs of the hotel and the small green one on which monkeys jumped

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noisily...Maa in Asansol in her crumpled cotton saree and her nightly routine of sleeping pills...Baba again...the white peaks turning gold in the dawn...the valley with a hanging cloud of dust and smoke...a little boy walking behind her...

Monisha does not read the *Times of India*. She prefers to get her news from the Internet. It is easier to search for advertisements. Which is just as well. Because in the *Times of India* on the day after, there is a small insert:

"Mr. Baldev Khanna and Mrs. Abha Khanna regret to inform that the wedding of their daughter, Shalini, scheduled to be held today at the Grand has been cancelled. We appreciate the support extended by all."

❑

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Another Time

Sumita Vaid Dixit

The bedroom was dark for the time of day. Sapna parted the light green curtains from the bedroom window and looked out. It was raining. The continuous rain had mellowed the light outside. The view from the window was claimed in parts by tall buildings under construction but spaces in between revealed a pale blue sky. Sapna opened the windows and saw little crowns of water dancing about her bonsais on the balcony wall. It was a beautiful day. She was glad the worst was behind her. As she tied the loose ends of the belt around her warm gown, Sapna wondered what Suresh was doing. He was already up as she heard some noises coming from the kitchen. That could not be the cook. On Sundays, the cook did not come before 12. That was one day of the week both refused to abandon the comforts of their bed to attend to the madness of the morning doorbells.

Last night, Suresh had found out about Sapna's affair with Shekhar. Though, Suresh had not asked her to leave or talked about separation, she was mentally prepared for it. She had, in fact, been preparing for long. But somehow no day seemed right to talk about it. Her life was so entangled with Suresh's, she did not know from where to open the first knot. Perhaps today was the day, Sapna thought, as she stretched her arms out from the window to feel the rain.

But what was she going to take with her, if she was going to leave Suresh? After what had happened, she could not even lay claim to the shampoo or the toothpaste. Suresh also shared them. It was almost comical that an ordinary item such as shampoo could question her right over it. The cane sofa, the bean bags, the bed, the bed sheets, the television, the refrigerator, the foot mats, the curtains, the jewelry, the shoe cabinet – their worlds were welded together. What was she going to take and what was she going to leave behind? It seemed like a surgery to cut

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open parts of the house, neatly pack the dismembered parts, and label the name of the claimant. 'How do you fit your past in small and big boxes?' The prospect of a separation began to make her weary. Sapna did not want to trouble herself with these thoughts, not for the time being. She left the window and sat on the bed, her head was bent over her feet. She saw her toe nails had grown out of bounds; a little dirt had collected in the corners, traces of silver polish here and there. If only she could take a few days off from her job. Sapna had terrible amount of work to finish. The financial results of the second quarter had to be shared with the press next Monday. Managing the internal communication of a technology company at such times was unforgiving. Confusion, angry emails, heated arguments and a breaking marriage, it was hard to juggle all the events in her life. Today, maybe she could take advantage of the glorious services offered in a modern parlour.

A sudden crackle of sound brought her back from her thoughts. Sapna could hear the kitchen exhaust. "Is Suresh frying something?" She got a little curious. She picked up her hairbrush, stood in front of the tall mirror facing the bed and began combing her black long hair. Her eyes were a little swollen. Her dark skin radiated even at 32. She quietly admired her glow. Her friends often said she looked like a schoolgirl. If only she was a few inches taller. Sapna, was short, barely five feet, her babyish oval face gave her youthful looks. Her nose sprang out with the enthusiasm of a teenager and mellowed with its descent. Her teeth were a bit long, but nicely framed in her mouth. Sapna looked beautiful and undistinguished at the same time.

She folded her hair in a yellow ruffle and let the coiled bun dangle at her nape. She turned around to tidy the bed when her gaze fell on the old blue sunflower photo frame by her bedside. Sapna had a vermillion dot in the centre of her forehead; a bright white smile and Suresh looked lean and dusky; his eyes shy with the knowledge of his new position as her husband. She picked up the frame and dusted it with short, forceful, blows of air.

Sapna had first met Suresh in college. Both had enrolled for a Masters in Business Administration. The college was in a quaint hill station, once the summer retreat of the Britishers. When Suresh introduced himself to her in the first class of the session, her heart jumped up and down like a rubber ball. Sapna was in disbelief of her unruly heart. "Was this love at first sight? But that was foolish..." Sapna struggled to understand her emotions.

At school, Sapna and her friends would giggle while describing their handsome beau astride a stallion. Mills & Boon had copiously fed

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their adolescent imagination. They laughed about it in college as a silly notion and by the time she was a graduate, there was a sense of despair with that wish. Love was a myth, and the idea of a 'right' man was a greater myth Sapna concluded after a bitter, three-year relationship.

Soon Sapna was going out with Suresh for long rides on his Enfield. As they cruised on the curves of the hills, the wind wildly stroked Sapna's hair; she clutched his back hard and pressed it against her yearning, full breasts. Nothing mattered at that moment. That was bliss.

Sex was mostly in borrowed quarters. Sapna was a reluctant partner in those dark enterprises. Suresh always pushed Sapna to ask her friends for a room. She felt awkward asking, and in the bargain was left with few friends. In time, Suresh's presence began to weigh on her. When she wanted to go out with her friends, Suresh wanted her in some room or the other.

Once they decided to get a little bold and have sex in the toilet. Based on the movies, the idea seemed wild. She was kneeling on the ground, her was head bent over the broken black toilet seat where Suresh was sitting with his jeans pulled down to his ankles. He held her small face in his big hands and moved it forward and backward. She felt sick with his penis choking her mouth. She thought she was going to throw up. He moved her head with a vigorous mechanical precision, forward-backward, forward-backward, while the stench of the stale urine crowded her head. Suresh let out a controlled groan and Sapna fled.

For a week they did not talk.

He promised they would never do it in a toilet but Sapna had stopped desiring him. She continued to have sex, because couples have sex. An obligation she lived to dispense with in the relationship after marriage.

Suresh had always been unsure of Sapna's commitment to the relationship. A day before their marriage, Sapna had called Suresh to tell him that she was not ready for marriage. Her father, Pankaj Khanna, a retired senior government official, told her such doubts were natural. Her friends, married and single, gave her comfort in such phrases: 'there's always the exit option', 'marriage is not the end of one's life'.

On the day of her marriage, nothing turned out the way she had imagined. Far from a perfect marriage, it was a botched up affair. Suresh's family arrived at 11 in the night; the official time for the reception of the baraat was 8:30 pm. The groom's family and his bevy of relatives scrutinized Sapna's relatives, the arrangement, the décor. Sapna's father had gone beyond his means to live up to the expectations of her in-laws. Suresh's father was an aspiring Major General and his stars shone

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bright in his horoscope. His wife, Kamla, often said at parties that their personal astrologer, who also offered his services to the prime minister, had predicted that Kishore Sharma would become a Major General one day.

When the time came to sit around the holy fire an argument of a sort erupted. Suresh's parents were anxious to get the job done at the soonest. "Do it the fast forward way" they said. Sapna's parents made a feeble protest but seeing Suresh's parents' determination, they decided to keep quite. Suresh's father took out a hundred-rupee note and covertly flashed it at the pandit, a Sanskrit scholar who prayed to God everyday. The pandit frowned at the meager amount and conveyed his discontentment suitably. Five hundred rupees and it was settled. The ceremony was over in 30 minutes. Sapna was offended by the casual approach of her in-laws but took relief in the thought that she would not have to stay with them.

The guests, who had waited long enough, dashed for the food counter. After all, they had to justify every paisa they had put into those colorful envelopes as gifts for the newly weds.

Relatives and friends began urging the married couple to dance. As Suresh and Sapna walked towards the dance floor, he held Sapna's mehendi hands with a new sensation. She belonged to him. She was his alone. Sapna held her heavy lehenga with her left hand, and began swaying to the music. She felt beautiful in her red wedding lehenga, the kalire dangled from her wrists, her right hand clasped Suresh's, she circled around him, she clapped in the air, dropping the lehenga, picking it up, Sapna smiled and blushed. And, yet she wondered why on the one hand she wanted a prefect marriage and on the other she did not love the man she was marrying. Marrying Suresh was marrying someone known. Known for nine years.... It was safer being with him than waiting for the right man to walk into her life.

Sex after marriage did not improve, but her discovery of Suresh as a husband made her forget her revulsion for sex. He was a good husband, a good host and she always said, 'you would be a good father'. But Sapna never forgot to take her birth control pills before going to bed.

They threw parties, quite often to fill the emptiness that grew each night. Every morning they woke up more distanced.

The maid came, the gardener, then the cook, and the awkwardness of the morning dissipated into the instructions given out to the domestic workforce. Breakfast was brief, so was their conversation. Milk, cereals, juice. "It is healthy food," Sapna often said when she sensed Suresh's

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dislike for the breakfast. It seemed like an attempt to ward off the guilt of not being a caring and attentive wife. He listened but never quiet agreed to her health facts. It was not in his nature to fuss over matters. A lavish Indian meal Suresh could never take delight in. Such pleasures came his way on visits to his parents. But back at their rented apartment, a brief breakfast meant fewer chances of an altercation at the table.

They had one car, a white second hand Zen, and their offices were not far. He would drop her first and then head to his place of work. Car conversations were never overbearing. Since distances were short, conversations had to end. At home such conversations would take ugly turns. Picking up groceries, attending dinners, planning movies, were the things discussed at home in front of the TV or at the dinner table.

Suresh worked in a dotcom that specialized in Internet advertising. The concept was relatively new. He was frustrated at the shortsightedness of the big companies that continued to invest lakhs in buying space on TV while ignoring the power of the net.

Suresh's parents never quite understood what their son did, it sounded alien and they never even made the effort to know. It was enough that their son was settled and doing well for himself. Sapna often remarked about his parents' indifference towards him. To her the indifference seemed odd, when her parents took interest in everything she did. A new hand bag was also an occasion for a phone call.

Only on special occasions, such as family gatherings, did Suresh's parents ask Sapan and Suresh to visit them. Sapna did not mind the gatherings. She dexterously conversed with high army officials, friends of her father-in-law, but sometimes seeing so many well established men reminded her of her father's diminished profile. Whenever her parents met her in-laws she was always tensed. It was an unequal relationship and she did not know how to strike a balance. If a certain comment or a gesture remotely indicated a disinterest in her parents, she became uneasy. She either disappeared into one of the rooms of her in-laws' big house or, walked out of the house pretending to take an urgent office call. Suresh could see through Sapna's theatrics. He would keep the party going with his talk of cars and the unpredictable stock exchange.

Office was another place Sapna was finding and fighting for her rightful place. But she did not know what that place was. Her women colleagues were smart and cleverer than her. She tried hard to keep pace with their cunning but always found herself wanting. She was struggling to be someone she was not capable of, yet she earnestly tried to adapt to the corporate culture.

Evenings Suresh picked her from office. She often walked to the

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car like an achiever to contrast her success with his failure. Suresh had lost two clients in two months and his failure further provoked her to break him. Once she woke up in the middle of the night and saw Suresh looking at her. She almost screamed. She had never seen Suresh so lonely, but she was helpless.

Sex became more agonizing. At times, she shut her eyes hard. She would open them only when the abuse was over. They always did it in the dark; Sapna could not bear to see Suresh in the light. One day Suresh switched on the bedside lamp. He saw her face contorted as though in great pain. He was repulsed at the sight. "Do you hate me so much?"

She had no simple answer to that. She hated him, but she cared for him too.

Every day, for two years, life was lived with hatred, anger and more parties. Then one day, Sapna met Shekhar Iyer in the Mumbai office. Employees of Simple Technologies had flown from different parts of the country to be at the annual conference. It was the time of the year, two weeks before the New Year eve, when all got together and the founder shared his vision. One of the announcements at the meet was Shekhar's transfer to Delhi to set up a BPO division. He was to assume duty in June next year.

Sapna was introduced to Shekhar by a common colleague. They shook hands. She liked the firmness of his grip. It was not hard, not limp. It was just right. A man's handshake. He was dark, 35 and tall. She found him handsome, at once desirable. The week spent in Mumbai was almost business-like. On the last day, Shekhar asked Sapna if she could join him and his friend for drinks. Sapna readily agreed. She looked forward to the evening of small discoveries.

Sapna was a little nervous when she walked into the restaurant. She was glad the light was not too bright, just muted enough to give the place a diffused look. Her hands trembled slightly as she shook hands with Shekhar's friends. She wanted to give the right impression. Shekhar got up to pull out her chair. When she sat, her shoulders went up, brushing her jaw line. The professional body stance was beginning to give way to that of a girl excited about the boy next to her.

After one rum and cola, Sapna eased into the scene and in not time she was in the thick of the chatter crackling over the table. She laughed, joked and stole glimpses of Shekhar now and then. Sapna could not help think why she did not feel so exhilarated at the terrace parties back home. With Suresh, conversations were limited. Cars, bikes, rallies and races alone excited him. She missed talking to him about movies, about characters in the novels, about life, about love. Inside her was

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a world eclipsed by Suresh's general view of life. Suresh was a practical sort of a person. He was clever with money. Rather than let money lie fallow in the banks he invested them in funds, property and gold.

Here with Shekhar she was laughing without care. Her body moved in a fluid motion. She walked in and out of conversations, while the cigarette casually dangled from her small fingers. Its perspiring tip, changing shades of red, orange, deep orange, ember red... She did not bother to look at her mobile for missed calls.

That night, Suresh had called Sapna several times. He had got his company business worth Rs 6 crore. He was desperate to share his excitement with Sapna but instead an indifferent recorded asked him to leave a message. So, he called is friends over to his place. Suresh tried to keep himself busy with men-talk, booze, business, and then all of a sudden, in the middle of a conversation, a wrenching pain gripped his heart. He could not shake off the loneliness. "Why couldn't Sapna love him?" The clank, the chatter, echoed into the night.

Throughout her plane journey back to Delhi, Sapna thought of Shekhar. He made her feel special that evening. Something in the way he spoke to her, looked at her, asked her about the things she liked, books she read, movies she watched. She spent that evening talking about herself. Suresh had never been so curious about her. She looked out from the window; the sky was a flat bed of endless blue. "Why couldn't she not have stimulating conversations with Suresh, or sit out in the terrace on a full moon night, laugh, get drunk and collapse into his arms". The memory of Suresh was a strain. She slipped out into the blue ocean with Shekhar.

Suresh had come to pick her up at the airport. It had been a week since he saw her. Sapna looked lovely, fresh and he wanted to make love to her that instant. He missed touching her. He wanted to feel her breasts, cusp them in his hands and moisten her nipples with his lips. He longed to be with her.

That night Suresh lay in bed, restless. After hours of fighting his urge he turned towards Sapna. He saw her undulating back. His hands quietly followed the curve of her waist and nervously reached for her breast. Sapna pushed his hand back. 'I am tired'. Suresh was not discouraged. He made another attempt, this time with the boldness of a husband. He climbed on her and began kissing her, pressing her breasts. She shouted and pushed him away with her legs. She hated Suresh for touching her body. She wanted to tear him up. "When did she become so violent?", Suresh was shocked by Sapna's reaction. Sapna threw two pairs of clothes into her bag, changed and left for her parents' place.

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Suresh pleaded Sapna for a dinner. Sapna's parents were concerned about her marriage and wanted her to make up. The sight of her parents, weak and distraught, made her feel cruel and selfish. Sapna wanted to scream and run away, but where. To a friend? For how long could she live with her friends? She had to sort out the mess.

They met at Zaika, a new Mughlai restaurant. Though, it was not the kind of place Suresh and Sapna often went to. They preferred having parties at home, with a familiar group. It was economical Suresh always said.

With nothing really to say, both quickly reached out for the menu. Sapna ordered a martini. Suresh asked for a peg of Glenfiddich whiskey and chicken tikkas for starters. For a moment, she was repelled by Suresh's shameless desire for chicken. He had an incredible weakness for chicken. If they had a fight and chicken was part of the dinner, he made it a point to finish the chicken first and mend matters later.

"Did he feel any of the anguish and frustration she experienced everyday?" Sapna wondered. In the manner Suresh admired his plate of tikkas, she wanted to slap him. "This man has taken away my life and replaced it with chicken tikkas!" A pale brown juice escaped to the corners of his mouth, when he bit into the tender tikka. "I want to make this marriage work," Suresh finally broke the silence over the table. Sapna disgusted, gave him the serviette to wipe off the juice stains. Suresh continued. "I am sincere about what I had said. You are the one who left me, not me. And I am here trying to talk to you. Do you even think about how I am coping with your sudden walkout; the explanations I had to give to my parents. Do you even think about anybody except for yourself?"

Sapna tried shaking off the image of her parents. "I want to be on my own for a while. I don't know what is going on. I cannot deal with this mental stress anymore." Suresh, now in a concerned voice: "Look, we have been together for nine years, we owe it ourselves. Let us give our marriage a try. Besides, there are other lives connected to ours. Let us try with all sincerity." Suresh's voice ringed with desperation. Sapna did not want to try. She was tired, exhausted and wished to leave the city. But to start all over gain, with no friends, in the midst of strangers, was not a solution either.

"Okay, let us give each other six months. And we will go to a marriage counsellor."

Marriage counsellor? Suresh was taken aback by the last suggestion. His parents or her parents never went to strangers to save their marriages. They managed their problems themselves. There was sanctity to a re-

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lationship and if the two partners could not preserve it, how could a stranger help even for an obscene sum of money. Besides, most of the marriage counsellors were divorcees. Such an irony! Fools go to marriage counsellors. Suresh protested silently. "Okay, I abide by your conditions."

Sapna and Suresh slept on the same bed. Though there was another room, it was a two bedroom flat, they could not afford a second air conditioner. Suresh and Sapna shared the house, the bed, the kitchen, the living room, cigarettes, the toothpaste, not like a couple, but companions who outside that bond had nothing much to expect.

Shekhar was in Delhi. A week after Shekhar had joined; he was to take his two American colleagues to Agra. The company was setting up its branch office in Agra. Sapna was also part of the two day tour. The first day was tiring, and no one was keen on visiting the Taj Mahal. On the last day, an Indian actress had been flown from Mumbai to entertain the Americans. Sapna, on Shekhar's suggestion, retired early from the party. He told her the event was not meant for ladies. As the night progressed, Sapna anxiously waited for a tap on the door. She had changed into her night dress, a presentable one, just in case. Shekhar knocked gently on the door. It was quite late, and he was not sure if Sapna was still awake. Sapna opened the door. The two stood there in complete silence. She looked at him; she wanted to be sure if he desired her too. He did. She threw herself in his arms and kissed him deeply. Their bodies collided in passion.

Sapna started coming late from the office. A lot of work she explained Suresh. Sapna was strangely happy. Being with Shekhar was a great relief from the ordinary life she lived with Suresh. She had thought of telling Suresh about Shekhar but the emotional fatigue that came with living with Suresh exhausted any desire to change the course of her life. It was less hard continuing with this way of life. Coming to the same house, with a life in order, a routine to fall back upon, plonking on the bean bag, watching TV with the dinner plate in the lap, walking into the same bedroom, was safer.

It was Saturday. Sapna and Suresh had to attend a wedding that night. Sapna was dressed in a bright red saree. A matching shawl neatly rested on her left shoulder. Her hair was curled from the ends; she had left her hair open. The ruby earrings and the necklace illumined her face. She dazzled. Sapna noticed her mobile was in Suresh's hand. "What are you doing with my mobile? And why are you not dressed?" Suresh sat quietly at the dinning table while his index finger circled the mouth of the whiskey glass. Suresh took a sip and put down his glass.

Sapna sat next to him. "We are getting late."

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"I will not take much time," Suresh's eyes were cold like the night outside. He handed over the phone to her. It was Shekhar's message. 'Darl'g, i luv u. i know m not suppsd to do this, but m drunk so forgive me. I can't contain my emotions. Its' bin long since we made love.'

Sapna's heart beat against her chest so fast; she thought she was going to die. She was caught. She blurted out something unintelligible. She did not know what to say, or how to defend herself. The next moment she saw Suresh's hand in striking distance.

"Does he love you?" Suresh screamed.

'I don't know."

"Has he said he will marry you?"

"No, he has not. Not yet..." Then let me tell you, Ms Sapna Khanna, he thinks you are a whore, an easy lay. Just as Prakash had."

Sapna was stunned by the mention of Prakash. "Suresh knew about Prakash? But, that was a longtime ago. And it was not even an affair". Sapna kept quiet.

Sapna took the slap as her penance. While she was secretly meeting Shekhar, Suresh was toiling in his business. While Suresh was eating at the dinner table alone, she was romancing Shekhar on the phone. While Suresh was trying to make the marriage work, she was making love to another man.

Suresh went out to the terrace. Sapna went back to her room. She wanted to call her parents, but thought against it. "What if Suresh did something to himself?" He was a broken man. Both slept on the same bed.

The next day, Suresh decided to make breakfast. Half fried eggs with butter toast. That was his favourite Sunday breakfast. He cooked the sunny side-up in clarified butter, a generous dollop it was, and after a few minutes, when the edges were crisp and brown, he tossed it with the yolk now in a puddle of butter. A delicate whitish film came over the yolk as if to protect it. He removed the half fried, when the yolk was still tender and thick.

When Sapna came out of the bedroom, breakfast was on the table. Half fried, toasts, butter and jam and tea. He did not like juice, but he kept a can of juice for Sapna. The two had breakfast in silence.

"The half fried is good. I had forgotten the taste completely," Sapna said.

"That's because you hardly venture into the kitchen."

"But you know I enjoy cooking. You know that..."

Suresh, at this moment, looked straight into Sapna's eyes. His eyes became teary.

"I am sorry about last night. I hit you, I feel miserable."

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After a long pause, Suresh then said, "I am willing to forgive and forget."

Sapna could not believe her ears. How could he forget about it? Does he even want to know what's wrong with their marriage? Does he mean he could think of making love to her knowing that she had been sleeping with another man?

"I don't know how to say this," Sapna said, "but I do not feel guilty about my affair with Shekhar. With him I feel unburdened. Suresh, you are very caring and I know you love me unconditionally. I am grateful. But I can give you nothing in return, only companionship of a friend. I feel miserable when you expect me to behave like your wife. I cannot do it; I have to force my self. Every time, I put on the Mrs Sharma act, I am being dishonest to you and myself. I can't do that anymore."

Sapna was now crying. "We have been with each other for more than 9 years now. I care for you very much but I can't stay with you at the same time." Sapna had at last spoken her heart.

"Let's share a cigarette," Suresh said after a long interval. Sapna was surprised by his calmness. He had given up smoking three weeks ago while she had continued.

They stood in the terrace under the extended roof. It was raining. Sapna leant against the wall. Suresh stood facing her. He was overwhelmed by her beauty. Sapna gently rubbed the goose bums on her hand with her palm, the air was cold.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? All this would not have happened." He asked Sapna without the hope of an answer. Sapna, not quite sure where to begin or how to express her thoughts, but words tumbled out, out of her control: "Because I did not have the courage."

"It could not have been worse than this," Suresh smiled. "Yes, you are probably right. But I am glad you found out." Sapna could see Suresh's love for her.

"I could not come up to you, because I didn't know what would happen. I knew I would have to leave, but I didn't know if I could stay alone. I was sacred. It was, it was, the fear of the unknown that made me lie to you."

Suresh took a drag, looked up, the sky was turning dark blue like the ocean at sunset. The breeze caressed his face; the hair on his forehead was thrown back by a gust of wind. Suresh exhaled and a certain heaviness began to leave him.

"Come on," Suresh's hand was gently wrapped around Sapna's wrist, "let us get wet in the rain."

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His Piece of Sky

Rajee Seth

For him the sky was limited. His share strayed in through the window as he lay on the bed looking out. And the wind reached him only if it blew in through that other room on the first floor.

He knew there was more to the sky. Just as he knew there was more to life than the living years of lying on the bed in a small room, in what was a pen of medicine bottles, sticky with the fluid of his hot and cold sweats.

And to know how large life is, one has to walk its expanse. Just as one must walk through beneath the sky to know how far it stretches. Outside—outside of oneself, the endless blue must be captured, in the eyes, and in the outstretched arms; it must be felt there. And the eyes do unwittingly catch the blue even if the arms cannot.

Arms? His left arm reached over to touch the right... all over, but there was no sensation.

The doctors say that his right side is paralysed. And is it possible, a man dying in halves? A half that belongs and a half that doesn't. One half that sides with living and the other half that watches inert. Like a body hung from a nail half-dead, half-alive and mankind agape, passes by.

He thought of Joseph and the picture—a bloody body-nailed. Christ is glorious. Joseph had explained. He atoned for sinners. Is that all? Sinners need never worry now -Jesus will bleed forever. No! No! He could never live with martyrdom. And when she walks into the room, his daughter-in-law's face says it all—this is the price you are paying for your sins... and we pay some for our sins by cleaning your filth. He then remembers his wife, Amro.

'Bless me!' she had sometimes said drowning in sentiment, 'That I should die before you and you light my pyre...'

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And he had blessed his bride who did not look a mother of four; drawn her into the expanse of his chest, which had not then collapsed like an airless balloon. Little did he know then, what the blessing would cost him. What it would mean to be abandoned midway, battling with those half-selves without her.

Had Amro been alive he wouldn't have had to face his daughter-in-law every morning. Sheltered from this nameless humiliation, which was carving up his soul.

How much of dying... how many concurrent deaths could a man live with? And why is death called simply an arrest of life? Death is what is felt... that which happens while it is being felt, like his own. His death was happening. That half which is dead and the other which is en route. And the watching...

The day... the day when death would finally come! That fistful of tranquil dust—death will then become unexperienced, unknown. It will just be... the being of an end.

Varun, his grandson, storms into the room, 'Baba! Ma wants to know if you want your milk now?'

He wipes his eyes with his left hand. On the right a thin stream trickles down; uninterrupted, unknown to him marking his cheek.

You will help me drink, won't you?'

Yes! Of course.' The force of a muffled emotion chokes him. Yes! I will drink the milk while you are here; from your hands.' It will save at least one painful moment. Saved from his daughter-in-law's piercing gaze.

Varun brings the milk and spoonful at a time he drains half the glass.

'Baba! When will you tell me a story? When will you come downstairs?' The feverish race to gulp the milk brooks no answer. Caught between the anxiety of Varun's school-rickshaw horn and the rumbling emptiness of his belly.

He does not reply... does not return anything to Varun... neither the story, nor the walk. No conversation, and neither fun nor laughter... one day Varun too...

He is scared. Scared of all those whom he does not repay. Cannot. They all stop giving him anything. He remembers the great distance he used to travel to bring bright, fresh flowers for the prayer room, for God. Nostalgia spans that sea of pain which he cannot always swim across... so he sinks.

The honk of Varun's rickshaw! A quarter of the milk still remains! Varun begins to fidget, his feet intemperate.

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'Baba quick! My rickshaw,' and he hurriedly empties the remaining milk into his mouth and runs away. The milk leaks out of the corner of his mouth and down his neck. He wipes his mouth with the towel but a sticky discomfort stamps him.

'How are you Babuji? How do you feel today?' His son Kamal walks into the room.

He wants to reply but knows the question awaits no response. His son, already busied, hums as he tightens his shoelaces.

The question—a toll he pays for entering the room, to break the silence. A tax, paid at a barrier.

Would his silence matter? Perhaps not. Instead of the routine 'I'm fine', he remains silent. His son collects his things and leaves. Leaving him with the grave pain of being proved right.

He should have replied. It is critical that he does... to keep the dialogue alive is a vital need for him... singularly his own... he cannot expect someone to do as much for him. It had been different with Amro. She had such endearing ways... 'You are such a rogue!' she would blurt, but never to him. Instead she would feign to address their son. Amused he would tease her and then she would head for his arms, burying herself there.

Sundown. His day drags its pace into the dark as if carrying a giant stone on its chest and then come the ominous sounds, which rule his night—the dogs and the baton-beating night watchman.

Flustered, Varun rushes in. 'Baba, you know that plot next door. They are building a house on it... they have dug up everything. Now where will we play marbles.'

'Here. In this room.'

'Here?' He stares bewildered. 'How? It's so small. How will Sonu, Pappu, Vicky all play here? Ma says that we must not make any noise in your room.'

'No! You must make noise here. A lot of noise. Play. I want to watch you all play.'

'Really Baba? Did you play marbles as a child?'

"Yes, I did...' He wants to lift up Varun in his arms but his back... Instead he says softly, 'I will lie here and watch whose marble scores.'

'Good!' Varun leaps up and claps his hands. 'Now Pappu cannot cheat me anymore. You must say that I have won each time... my good Baba!' His warm, pulsating palms reach out to caress the cadaverous face.

'Okay!' He is overcome with emotion. 'You should not cheat', he

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wants to say... but... he does not want to say that to Varun. Let those alive, walk the maze of their right and wrong.

Those few days the children filled the room with their prattle. His days felt suddenly, curiously winged. The children came only in the evening, but he waited. The doom of nothingness had been broken.

On the fourth day, they were bored. Pappu's mother stopped him from coming and Sonu broke his marbles against the wall.

Vicky was peeved with Varun for playing in his home and said, 'I will not play in your Baba's room, I will not speak to you.' Unnerved Varun agrees to another playground.

The room buckles under the weight of this new solitude. The wind turns cooler and a cloud quietly overshadows his piece of sky in the window.

Thud thud... thud! Perhaps the sound of the foundation being dug next door. He had married off his daughter, Minni, while the vacant plot had still been around. It had been so easy to walk out of the door and straight into the wedding enclave. Or he would have had to carry everything to that wedding hall in the next street. Like he did for Niti's wedding. His friend Ramnath had marvelled, 'You really are tough.'

Tough? He tries to feel his right hand again with the left. Unnerved he clenches his eyes shut... but a movement of the eye does not blot out everything. Coiled inside... the wounds await... ready to strike.

The scaffolding began to rise. Bang, smash, hammer, crash... a cluster of sounds rose every morning. He was carefully tuned into each noise as if it were a divine word... a sound heard somewhere. 'Are they building a house next door?' he asks Devaki, the maid.

'Prithvi Babu's son has just returned from America and he is building a two-storied house...'

'How much has been built?'

'The ground floor is nearly complete.'

'Devaki! Please move my bed over to that other wall!'

He felt better there. The angle of the room felt changed and some things seemed different now. He recalled suddenly that horrible art teacher from school. Placing a hideous flowerpot on the table he had asked each student to draw it from his own 'angle'. But he had hated drawing so he had asked a friend to do it for him. He was soundly thrashed for his trouble and the teacher had screamed, 'Two people cannot have the same angle. Someone else has made this." It was a relief that the instruction in angles had ended early... but did it really end! It continued... from here the room suddenly did look different.

Sounds, entangled next door, could be slowly isolated and savoured

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from over there... each fibre of sound separated from the thick coil of noise that rose from below... as if he had separated it with his own agility, with the finesse of his own ears.

He tries to swell his lungs with air... but his traitorous breath falters. Exhausted he lies back. He now hears them as never before... these sounds which have been there torever... heard now from the back lanes of life.

Since the masons started, the drone of their work soothes. A sound identifying life, flagging it. Foundations, scaffolds, stones, bricks, pipes, girders, cement, walls, doors, windows...—all happening. He hears and he knows. And when the second floor started he could see it all... the labourers wiping their sweat, untying the bundles of their food, belching and smoking their bidis.

This concrete testament to the world after. To what will prevail; life after him. Houses, where they all lived once. Ancestors before him and before them... but witnesses have all gone. Life prevails in spite of them? And his not being alone in the pass over suddenly makes him feel strangely secure.

But thoughts of the deafening silence return. Mar the repose. He knows that the sounds will die soon; the house will be complete.

Long days. Kamal at the toll gate, the exercised pace of his daughter-in-law's footsteps and Varun's childish caprice—from his room to a playground far away. And the whiz of life stalks them all, urges them away from that final truth—the bed where they must all freeze into stillness.

Tumbling headlong into the jaws of death! All of them. Do they know? He must stop them. He must. 'Look at me. Your future.' But no one hears. Life is seen only as today. Perhaps he should be strung on a nail outside—half-dead half-alive so that they can see their future in him and stop. Only then could they repay their debt to life. Now, while they are still alive. No waiting for another life to atone for sins... riddled by the contempt in someone's glance.

But they all want to wait... suffer their fate... neither to learn nor share. It must be. He breaks into a sweat.

The house is complete. The silence returns.

A grazing sound on the roof next door and he turns his head sharply. He can see the clean-up, the house paint and celebrations. Inmates -living, falling ill, glued to their beds, wilting with fever, with loneliness, rotting, dying in halves, quarters and wholes—dying like him.

Like me! He leans over to feel his dead self... but nothing... he cannot even feel his own dying.

Silent, motionless death! What if he should miss it when it happens.

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What if it creeps up on him while staring at the house next door, staring at sunshine or the stars or in slumber.

No! Not in sleep! He should see it, know it. After all these years of timing moments he must not miss the finale. His last wish. To watch the sky as it overcomes him breath after breath.

He called out to Devaki sharply. But no one came. He clanged the steel glass against the tin chair near him. Finally, Varun asked, 'What do you want Baba?'

'Call Devaki.'

He asked her to return his bed to the same spot. He must return there now. It's too quiet here. The house is finished, there is nothing to wait for anymore.

It feels better here. He moves the pillows. The glass of water, the washbasin, the table of medicines are all rearranged again. Renewed angles. He chuckles at the thought of the drawing teacher and settles down with a deep sigh—back to his final spot. Death will come here but he will be looking out at his sky when it does, sinking in it breath after breath.

He runs his fingers over his face, his eyes. No rush here. Returned for good, to stare our finally into the deep blue and to sink into it!

Slowly he turns to look out of the window and freezes. Where is the sky? A concrete wall had blotted out his piece of the sky.

Translated from Hindi by Jasjit Purewal

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STORY

Brown Morning

Frank Pavloff

This story is about conformity at it worst as a fascist regime passes laws that restrict people's liberties one by one, and the citizens are left with absolutely no space to manoeuvre. By the state's orders, pets like cats and dogs, except those having a particular colour, brown, are to be disposed off. Then the paper *City Daily* is closed down by the militia police, for questioning this move. Only *Brown News* remains. Now, the books published by the house from which *City Daily* came out, are banned too, because in those books, the words 'dogs' or 'cats' were not preceded by the word 'brown'. Soon, out of fear, people begin to put the word 'brown' before every word they speak or write ....The price people pay for acquiescence hoping that they would be left alone if they did not react, is total loss of freedom, and even life....Though written in French, this story is relevant to all societies where blind obedience is demanded, without any consideration for the individual's independence, as is becoming increasingly evident in the fast-spreading paranoia in the West and the East alike, compromising the individual's liberties following the 'security' situations that are perceived to have arisen consequent on 'terrorist' activities....

Ed.

Legs stretched out in the sun, Charlie and I were lazily sharing whatever came into our minds over a coffee. Enjoying some pleasant moments when the time passes by seamlessly. Suddenly he told me that he had to have his dog put down. I was a bit taken aback, but nothing more than that. To me, it's always sad to see an ailing dog having lived its span of fifteen years, which is pretty long in any case. But one should get used to the fact that one day it's going to die anyway.

You know, Charlie said, I couldn't have passed it off as a brown one.

Well, that's not the colour for a Labrador anyway, but what else was wrong with it?

Nothing. Simply that it was not brown.

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My god! Does it mean that they have started on dogs now?

Yes.

I was quite aware of it for the cats. Last month, I had to get rid of mine, one of those street cats that had the misfortune of being born with white and black spots.

In fact, the surplus of cats became unbearable. And the State scientists found that it was much better to keep the brown ones. Experiments proved that brown cats are better suited to urban life; they produce fewer litters and eat less. Damn it, a cat is only a cat. As the problem had to be resolved one way or the other, they finally came up with a decree for eliminating cats that were not brown.

The militia police went around dispensing arsenic balls free of cost. Mixed in the cat food, they dispatched a cat in less than two doses.

At first I was heartbroken, but soon I forgot about it.

When it came to dogs, I was quite taken aback. I don't know why, perhaps because they are larger, or because they are known to be man's best companion. In any case, Charlie had just talked about it as casually as I had about my cat. No doubt he was right. Being oversensitive doesn't pay much, and for dogs it is true that the brown ones are stronger.

There was nothing much to talk about, so we parted but with a strange feeling. As if we had missed out on something. This thought lingered in the mind for the rest of the day.

A few days later, I informed Charlie that the *City Daily* would not come out anymore.

He was stumped by this news. He read the *City Daily* every morning while taking his café crème.

- What happened? Are they on strike? Are they bankrupt?

- No. It's the follow-up of the dog story.

- You mean the brown ones?

- Yes, as usual. We had hardly passed a day without taking about this Brown decree. The *City Daily* almost questioned the conclusion of the scientists. Readers were confused, and some of them even hid their dogs.

- That's like inviting trouble.

- You are right. They ended up being banned.

- God! Then what about horse racing?

- Well, my dear, you have to look for your tips in *Brown News*. There is no other option left. It seems that it maintains the same slant for racing and sports.

As there was no other means of getting news, something is better than nothing. Because, one cannot survive without one's daily dose of information.

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That day, again, I was having coffee with Charlie. I had become a bit sceptical as a reader of *Brown News*, although around me in the café the people behaved as though nothing had happened at all. I thought I was overreacting.

After that, it was the turn of the books, a shady story again. The publishing houses belonging to the same group as the *City Daily* were taken to court, and their publications were removed from the library shelves. It's true that if we had read those books carefully, we would indeed have found the word dog or cat in every volume at least once, and not always alongside the word brown. They should have been cautious.

Enough is enough, Charlie said, the law is the law. There is no point playing cat and mouse with it. Brown! he added, looking around him. Brown mouse! If by any chance the people around us overheard the conversation.

To be on the safe side, we had started adding brown at the end of every sentence or certain words. In the beginning, ordering a brown pastis sounded strange. In due course, taking into consideration the simple fact that slang changes with time, we no longer found it strange to replace 'fuck' or 'bullshit' by 'brown'. At least it was appreciated, and we also felt good.

We had almost won a lot of money on the three-horse race. Although not a major one, it was still the first brown victory. It also helped us to accept the new regime.

I remember very well that one day I had invited Charlie to come over to my house to watch the Cup Final. We laughed crazily throughout. The sort of thing that happens when you bring in a new dog.

It was brown from the tip of its tail to the end of its nose, and it had brown eyes, too.

- You see, finally this dog is a more loving animal than the previous one. I shouldn't have made such a big fuss about the black Labrador.

He could not even finish his sentence before his dog darted headlong under the sofa, yelping crazily. As if to say, I will shout at the top of my voice, even though I am brown, I don't obey my master or anybody else.

In a flash, Charlie had understood.

What, you too?

Well, you are going to see.

And at that point my cat darted out like an arrow, and climbed up the curtain to take refuge on top of the cupboard. It was a tomcat with brown fur. How we laughed that day! Talk about coincidence!

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- You see! I told him. I have always had cats and . . . Isn't it cute, this one?

- Lovely, he replied.

Then we turned on the television while the brown animals watched each other from the corner of their eyes.

I no longer remember who won the match, but we had a nice time, and we felt safe. Life becomes much easier when you do exactly the same things as others around you. The choice of Brown could be good as well.

Of course, I was bothered about the little boy whom I walked past on the other side of the street. He was crying for his white poodle lying dead at his feet. But he had to understand that the dogs are not banned as such. All he had to do was to look for a brown one. Even tiny brown ones were available. So that he would remain within the law and quickly forget his old dog as we had.

And yesterday, it was unbelievable. I who thought myself safe was almost taken in by the city militia dressed in brown uniforms. Men who were merciless in their conduct. Fortunately, they could not recognize me for they were new to this locality, and they didn't know everybody yet.

On Sundays, Charlie and I used to play cards. That Sunday I was on my way to Charlie's, carrying a crate of beer, which would last us two or three hours over snacks. As I reached his house, to my surprise, I found the door of his flat was smashed to pieces. Two militia policemen were posted at the front door to disperse the curious crowd. I pretended as though I were going to the flat above, and went up. Later I took the lift back. Outside, people talked in hushed voices.

- But his dog was a pure brown one. We have all seen it.

- Yes, they said that previously he had not a brown but a black one. A black one.

- Previously?

- Yes, previously. Now it is a crime to have kept one that was not brown even before the law was made. And it is not difficult to find out. Just ask the neighbours.

I rushed back. A trickle of sweat went down my back. If having had one previously was an offence, then I was on the wrong side of the law. Everybody in my building knew that previously I had had a black-and-white cat. Previously! I hadn't given it a second thought.

This morning the Brown Radio confirmed the news. Charlie is no doubt among those five hundred arrested. The official line was that even if they had bought brown ones recently, it did not necessarily mean that they had changed their mindset.

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'Having had a dog or a cat at any point of time against the Brown law is an offence.' The announcer even added, 'An offence against the State.'

What followed the next was even worse. One risked getting into serious trouble even if one had never possessed a pet personally, but if someone in the family, for example, father, brother, or cousin, had kept one against the Brown law at any point in their life.

I had no idea what happened to Charlie. This was too much. It was crazy. And I believed I was now safe, at least for a short while, with my brown cat. Of course, they must be still looking for the previous owners to arrest them.

I could not close my eyes throughout the night. I should have reacted when they came up with the first law on brown pets. After all, it was my cat, like it was Charlie's dog. We should have said no right then. But how could we stop them either? It happened so fast. There was the workload, then our everyday worries. Everybody accepted it without protest in order to be left alone.

There is a knock on the door. It's too early in the morning. No one comes at this hour. I am afraid. It's not even day as yet, it's still dark outside. But stop knocking so loudly, I am coming . . .

Translated from French by Dhritabrata Bhattacharjya 'Tato'

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Jayanta Mahapatra: The Poet of the Soil

Syamsundar Padihari

Indian English Poetry after 1970 is called Poetry Today. The critic C.N. Srinath says on the poets of the period. "Coming to the Indian Poetry Today one finds him enjoying the bliss of ignorance." Such a poet is neither concerned with his personal surroundings nor with his social boundary. The pollution in Indian politics and its horror has grasped the common man's heart. Life has become devastated and inconsistent. The moral degradation and social indiscipline have contaminated the human mind. There is a great difference between life and livelihood. The poetry of Today stands in this background. The main conflict is between the personal and its immediate significance with the relationship of the self with the external world. The basic problem with modern poetry is the relationship of the self with the other, the distance felt by the consciousness between being aware and what one is aware of.

Jayanta Mahapatra is a famous Indian English poet, deeply rooted in Indian ethos. He stands tall among the many rootless Indian English language poets. His deep patriotism, humanism and nostalgia for the lost glories of his race stir Mahapatra's listless, enslaved compatriots. He is a true poet of-the soil. He is a gifted poet fascinated by the Indian heritage, myths and legends. It is undoubtedly quite useful for us to examine the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra against the broad perspective of Indian Poetry written in English particularly, in the post-Independence phase. An important characteristic of such poetry has been its emergence as different—though written in the English language—from the mainstream of English literature, English themes and ideas and the English sensibility,. Indian English poetry undoubtedly forms part of Indian literature. It is Indian in sensibility, Indian in choice of themes and ideas and English only in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian milieu and environment, culture and tradition, landscape and mindscape. Mahapatra's themes fit this description.

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Mahapatra seems closer to the modernist movement of the first half of the last century with its open-ended form and reliance on recurring symbols to provide coherence to non-linear, fragmented structures. Mahapatra's persona is of an estranged, distanced, sensitive artist rather than that of an invisible or playfully prominent post-modernist author. As in modernist writers, there is less importance on the material world and more emphasis on subjective memory and the inner self, the psychological, in contrast to the post-modernist's emphasis on almost totally self-enclosed art forms. Mahapatra's is an elite art, aimed at a small, discriminating readership. His poetry takes the past into its orbit, infuses it with the present and looks forward to the future. It at once encompasses the history, the myths and embodies a vision for the future. Hence it defies the exact terminology 'modern' and 'postmodern' for it is imbued with the sense of contemporaneity that includes both modernism and post-modernism. As a literary artist he obtains the tradition and enriches it with his individual talent. He has been successful to a great extent in bringing a native tradition alive in his poetry.

In Mahapatra's poetry, personal feelings are intensified as the poet questions the existence of the self; the other often takes the form of local society, and especially Hindu culture, ritual and spirituality, symbols and the past from which he has been alienated by his grandfather's conversion to Christianity and his own English language education. In this poetry everything is problematic, put into doubt, as Mahapatra observes his environment and listens quietly, sensitively to his inner feelings, the sources of his poetry, bringing momentary perceptions of relationships and fleeting images of contrast. The poems appear a continuous relation of aspects of the isolation, loneliness, solitude, alienation of the self from external realties in a world without apparent purpose. This is the existential dilemma of most modern literature. While Mahapatra's world is filled with personal pain, guilt, remorse, hunger, desire and moments of renewal, his environment is filled with symbols of belief by the ordinary lives of the people of Cuttack, the temples, the Hindu festivals, the ancient monuments. Poverty, deprivation and prostitution recur in his verses. "All these things happen around me," he says, "I can't ignore them and write about the 'better' things of life -- about the lives of the upper classes. I have got friends in the lowered stratum of society. I can be a lot more free with them than with other poets who bear such burdensome egos on their shoulders."

It will appear to anyone that he is a poet with a high level of fidelity to his native environment. A poet's positive response to his geographical as well as cultural surroundings plays a significant role in

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assuming a mask of the personal. It is a sort of supra-mundane identity developing from physical identity. By virtue of his birth and up-bringing Jayanta Mahapatra is firmly rooted in the landscape of his native land Orissa. The important places of his state, Cuttack, Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark, the Chillika lake, its legends, history and myths, its tradition and culture, it's past, present and future, have been integrated into his mental landscape. These places in Orissa are not only politically or commercially important, but they are important also in terms of the rich heritage of the people. The tradition of Orissa, her history and culture and what is more, her historic past, have been associated with these places, from which his poems have originated. Mahapatra has given ample evidence of this awareness in many poems, particularly in "Evening in an Orissa Village," "The Orissa Poem," "The Indian Poems," "The Indian Way," Dawn at Puri" and so on. In reply to the citation of the Award of the National Academic of Letters(Sahitya Akademi), he said:

To Orissa, to this land in which my roots lie and lies my past and in which lies my beginning and end, where the wind knees over the grief of the river Daya and where the waves of the Bay of Bengal fail to reach out today to the twilight soul of Konark, I acknowledge my debt and my relationship."

"Relationship," Mahapatra's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning masterpiece, tells of his quest for his roots. The quest for roots is a prominent trend in modern Indian English Poetry. Notable Indian poets writing in English also display this trend in most of their poems. One can cite, for example R.Parthasarathi's poem "Home Coming." Similarly Mahapatra's "Relationship" draws upon a wide variety of material connected with Orissa's landscape, myth, history and culture. He looks at Orissa's past and is pained to find its contrast with the present. With a nostalgic mind he recalls the panorama of Orissa's heroic past and realizes that this past, to which the river Daya was a witness, has become only a myth. Once a heroic and militant race, it is now no more than a mere memory, for, its successors proved to be unworthy of keeping the glory of their ancestors afloat and drifted away from their ideals. The present reality to which the river Daya was a witness is the sad consequence of a decline in not only our past heroism and valour but in our perennial values of life. He writes:

It is hard to tell now
What happened to the anxious skies
How the age-old proud stones
Lost their strength and fell
And how the waters of Daya

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Stank with the bodies of my ancestors
My eyes close now
Because of the fears that moves my skin.

The poet laments the downslide because he feels and rightly says he is an integral part of everything that Orissa is identified with. He has a strong sense of belonging which accounts for his nostalgic tone. In *Relationship* he refers to the Barabati fort of Cuttack which is now in ruins, a symbol of vanquished dynasties.

The poet is at a loss to understand how the successors of such great ancestors have become so unheroic and unworthy of their predecessors. An awareness of the contemporary situation brings the poet into a state of despair. He is aware of the changing contours of contemporary life and composes poems out of it. He depicts the contemporary situation of law and order in the 1980s. The anti-national activities in the Punjab in the name of Khalistan and the Bhopal Gas tragedy are narrated in his poetry. With a tone deeply imbued with pathos, the poet observes that life has lost its charm as it is beset with danger and uncertainty.

I can hear the broken voice of the night
crying in my hands, bloody and black,
and carrying with it the joint smells
of flowers well past their best..
(Dispossessed Nets P-49)

Mahapatra presents the contemporary life in order to learn the anguish and predicament of modern man. He relates the past with the present. The past is brought alive for a moment of 'broken empires' and 'of vanquished dynasties'. This nostalgic harking back to the past overwhelms the poet.

Now I stand among the ruins,
Waiting for the cry of a night bird
From the river's far side
To drift through my weariness
Listening to the voices of my friends....
With the smells of the rancid fat of the past.
(*Relationship*)

The poet now standing among these ruins, drifts through his weariness, listening to the voices of his friends and 'writing poems' with the smell of 'the rancid fat of the past.' The present would be better

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understood, appreciated and endured in the light of the past and one would learn how to live from other people's lives. Mahapatra's conception of man's relation to what he perceives brings him face to face with history and myth when his 'self' is discovered in the act of attention The interaction between 'self' and reality -- the reality that eludes but includes man--form the bedrock of Mahapatra's poetry, which, for him, is the exploration of myths and it is linked with the world of art and sculpture. Hence, he continues his quest for an 'essence divine' and for 'grace' in relationship between man and man, man and god and god, men and sculptured art.

Mahapatra seems to have the conviction that tradition is a continuity and one has to understand the present in terms of the past and the past in terms of the present. In an article published in the *Literary Criterion* (Mysore) he writes:

> *Relationship* is a product of dreams; has the mundane speak of the demands of a pilgrimage, threatened by the living Oriya past, by raging hunger and a persistent sexuality . In brief, we can say that there is in the thematic framework of *Relationship* something which appears to be a fine blend of myth and vision.

There is a profound sign of introspection in his poetry. The poet has tried to create a symbol establishing a deep thematic relationship between the inner world with the outer world. "Orissa Landscape," Evening in an Orissa Village," "Dawn at Puri" etc., are the representation of his own native place. Mainly Puri on sea is represented as a real lively character in his poetry. Temple, priest, beggar, fisherman, now all these material truths have become accelerated in his inner consciousness, that they are gradually converted into intellectual symbols and images in the heart.

> At Puri the crows
> The one wide street
> Lolls out like a giant tongue
> Five faceless lepers move aside
> As a priest passes by
> And at the street's end
> The crowd thronging the temple door;
> A huge holy flower
> Swaying in the wind
> Of greater reasons."
>
> (Taste for Tomorrow)

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Here the tone of humanism of a sympathetic, poetic hero is reflected. The assemblage of deformed, leprous beggars in the Bada Danda communicates the pain and poverty of life. They turn aside at the approach of the pandas and priests. The Singhadwar becomes over-crowded and sonorous with temple bells. One can visualize the directness of the scenery of Puri temple and Bada Danda. This poem is presented with sharp satire and humanism. K.Ayyappa Paniker says about Mahpatra's poetry: "An examination of the recurring images in Mahapatra's poems reveal that he is an Oriya to the core. The sun of the eastern coast of India shines through his poems. The eastern, sea sends its morning wind through them; Mahapatra, a child of the sun and the sea, delights in invoking the god of fire and the god of water in poems like "Sunburst," "The Exile," "India Summer Poems," "This stranger," "My daughter...."

Love doesn't have any existence in today's life. Only burning passion is involved. The woman becomes the victim of the commercial, passionate instinct of exploitation. Her freedom is affected. She is to put up with everything after becoming a wife. She maintains a mechanical life. She neither has emotion nor any interest. Only a fatigued, tired, exhausted and tasteless life is her world. As if she herself is a mechanical creation, though a wife, but a prostitute on the other hand. She is forbidden to see her face in the mirror.

> The good wife
> lies in my bed
> through the long afternoon
> dreaming still, unexhausted
> by the deep roar of funeral pyres
> In the darkened room
> A woman can't find her
> Reflection in the mirror.

Engaged in love, the husband and the wife avoid the summer heat and float in the dreamland. It is a nice way to remain fresh and unexhausted even though outside the room there blows a severely hot wind carrying the burning intensity of funeral pyres. The poet gives a hint about two types of heat—the one outside the room due to the strongest sun-rays and the other in the married couple inside the room.

'Love' and 'passion' in Mahapatra's poetry are chiefly opposite to that of Ezekiel, Kamala Das and Shiv K.Kumar. There is no deficiency of feeling in Ezekiel's sceptical style; there is the sick mentality in the poetry of Kamala Das and lack of feeling of a unique soul in Shiv K.Kumar's poetry. The poetic hero, who had been to a whorehouse to

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study more about woman is suddenly turned into an image. The body becomes absolute. He fails to be involved in the sexual act. Rather, the identity of a generous humanism and firm social consciousness are found.

You fall back against her in the dumb light,
Trying to learn something more about women
While she does what she thinks proper to please you,
The sweet, the little things, the imagined,
Until the statue of the man within
You've believed in throughout the years
Comes back to you, a disobeying toy.
And the walls you wanted to pull down,
Mirror only of things mortal, and passing by:
Like a girl holding on to your wide wildness
As though it were real, as the recurring voice
Tone the membrance of your half-woken mind
When like a door, her works close behind:
"Hurry, will you? Let me go,"
and her lonely breath thrash against your kind.
(The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street)

He is completely vanquished by the mismanagement, disorder, uncertainty and instability in Indian politics and by the pathetic condition of the common man in India. He has presented the ruined state of the Indian environment and poverty in an artistic way in the form of a satire of the contemporary socialism and of its leaders in his poem on the twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Republic of India.

Do we want to feel the ground
give way beneath us ?
This is a barren world that has been .
Prowling round my room,
Epidemics in the poisoned air,
Dusty streets stretching away
Like disgruntled socialists.
(The Twenty-fifth Anniversary of a Republic)

In "A Country" Jayanta Mahapatra presents the picture of hunger and starvation in the countryside of India. The poem records the sorry plight of the people even after Independence. Struggle and fighting could not change the condition of the people. He sometimes visualizes and thinks about the condition of his own country. He broods over the sorry state of his mother land. He sings:

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Sometimes at night when all voices die
my mind sees earth, my country–
to accept sacrifice, the loss of friends,
and sons who vanished suddenly in seventy two.
However much I provoke and curse
I am unable to force an answer out of you.
Wherever I try to live,
In pious penitence at Puri
Or in the fiery violence of a revolutionary
My reason becomes a prejudiced sorrow
Like socialism.

Mahapatra wants to become a socialist. But he cannot understand others and himself too. He is puzzled. It is the great sorrow of the poet.

Relationship establishes a sense of relationship between self and the other. The personal emotion of the poetic self is chiefly tied very profoundly with the environmental surroundings, tradition and totality of life. Mahapatra has realized the heart-beat of the dead artists in the stone- carving art and sculpture of the temples in Orissa. He has also made an interaction with stone-carving and inscriptions. He has established the relationship between man God and eternity of time unlike Keats' 'Grecian Urn'. In this context, the critic Prema Nandakumar has said: "Lyrical in intensity but epical in comprehension, *Relationship* is real achievement, for here there is neither 'waiting' nor 'false start' but triumphant arriving" (Iyengar and Prema Nandakumar - P - *777).* That means the complete perfection of the poet is realized in the poem. The journey of the poetic hero has come to an end successfully, there is neither 'waiting' at the preliminary session nor 'falsity' in the mid-term.

If we look at from *Relationship* to "Life Signs", we can observe the wide range of the individual state of emotion to the universal level. Mahapatra has presented his own experiences and impressions on the relationship with poetic words. Can a poet express himself in a poem? "Will a poem of mine be the only answer?" He says about the value of words— "Words have value only if one is not alone" and "No words are promises." That means the words become meaningful in a complete and appropriate environment.

When you are seated on the golden throne
balanced on your authentic family,
trusted friends , children and the country
from which you cannot cut yourself loose,
then perhaps the fabulous road is laid out
in front of you
decked with words."

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As a poet, he has to fight with words. He is to choose words and to unfold words out of a handful of words. But as a common man, he is very much conscious of the excessive implication and lack of words.

> Yet I only know
> this word which lets me survive inside,
> this liberal ethic-
> is one long error of experience.

The language and emotion of Mahapatra happen to be so beautifully emerged, it creates an excitement of passion and emotion in the mind and heart of the readers, for which he becomes prominent among Indian English poets and also the most discussed in the field of international poetry. To my mind, Jayanta Mahapatra is considered as one of the best Third World poets of our time who himself is the unity of his work.

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Is There a Rural/Urban Transition in Kanhu Charan's Novels?

Subhakanta Behera

Kanhu Charan Mohanty (1906-94), one of the greatest and the most prolific novelists in Oriya literature, has lived almost the whole of the twentieth century, and hence witnessed all important events, developments and movements in the world, and the country in particular, during the century. His literary world was influenced and moulded by them. The ravages of the two World Wars and their attendant evils, rise of Marxism-Communism as a politico-economic and social ideology in a global perspective, and India's Freedom Struggle, Gandhian ideas and values, and post-Independent India's struggle to come to terms with new realities and challenges in nation-building, all put their imprint on Kanhu Charan's novels in one way or other. At the same time, he was not forgetful of Orissa's deep-rooted customs and traditions, although sometimes trying to be reformist or rejectionist.

Perhaps that is why Kanhu Charan's novels are embedded in the immediate society that surrounded and interacted with him daily, thus making him a socially committed and responsible writer. But that society was not restricted to villages only; it also included towns. In other words, Kanhu Charan celebrates both rural and urban life, and brings out their nuances. But in the Indian context, the dividing lines between village and town, rural and urban, are also the fault-lines between values, ideologies and the morals of the two. These fault-lines have become clash-lines, at least in our general discourse, and in literature and art forms like cinema and drama. Village and town are pitted against each other, in a dichotomy of good versus bad, fair versus unfair, just versus unjust and so on.

In Oriya literature, such rural-urban dichotomy clearly manifests in novels such as *Chhamana Athaguntha*, *Mamu* and *Prayaschita* by Phakirmohun

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Senapati (1843-1918), all written in the heyday of colonialism when Orissa was still village-centric and urban culture, in a nascent stage. In the first two novels based on the changing agrarian relations in rural Orissa, Phakirmohun condemns the new dispensation—new western ideas and values, and portrays Ramachandra Mangaraj and Natabara Das as products of the new pernicious culture. Similarly, in *Prayaschita* that has an urban background, Phakirmohun protests against blind and irrational acceptance of western education, ideas and mores. What Phakirmohun has tried in all his fictions and stories, is to uphold indigenous agrarian, communitarian traditions, and to reject new ideas and institutions of colonialism that accompanied the emerging urban culture and that supposedly opposed indigenous traditions. So ultimately one finds the triumph of good over bad, fair over unfair and just over unjust, and strangely all virtues are construed as the 'prerogatives' of the indigenous rural traditions! Thus, fault-lines between the two opposite cultures, rural and urban, become clash-lines between the two.

Unlike Phakirmohun, Kanhu Charan lived a long, eventful period, and experienced a series of transitions and shifts during his lifetime. In order to understand and appreciate his literary world and his sensibilities, one has to first contextualise his novels. Text-context analysis provides a window to the author's mind, thus facilitating a better understanding and holistic perspective. Kanhu Charan embarked on his literary journey around 1924, which continued for more than half-a-century. Essentially village-based, Orissa had very few urban centres, Cuttack being the main town, but due to the slow progress of modern education, lack of industrialization and tenacious rural orthodoxy, urban culture did not spread much in the first half of the 20th century. So in pre-Independent India, Orissa largely remained rural, and no wonder, the colours, textures, hues, sounds, dreams and realities of rural Orissa provided the immediate canvas to Oriya authors. Kanhu Charan was not an exception, but at the same time the ongoing Oriya movement for a separate Orissa province, the Gandhian movement for the independence of the country, the dynamics of the nationalist politics in Orissa, and Gandhi's socio-economic programme for the uplift of the country, all contributed to the theme and plot of his novels. After Independence, and with the gradual spread of urban culture in Orissa in terms of the rise of towns, industrialization, and growth of educated middle class and professional and employed classes, his novels started reflecting their attendant peculiarities and problems.

Against this broad context, Kanhu Charan wrote around 56 novels, starting with *Utsabe Byasane* (1923) and ending with *Yakshya* (1985). At the outset, it may be pointed out that chronologically some of his novels

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cannot be divided into 'rural-based' and others as 'urban-based,' nor can it be said that all his novels belong to either of the exclusive categories, rural or urban. It is because, throughout his writing career, he has moved back and forth between village and town, and this is also reflected sometimes in the same novel. Perhaps, that is why the village-rural transition in his novels is not complete, and that is even not clear in his intention.

Yet, many of Kanhu Charan's novels are exclusively village-based, but it is difficult to agree with the line of thought that the problems of the contemporary Oriya society like casteism, child marriage, and opposition to widow remarriage, inter-caste marriage etc., are only the problems of rural Orissa. On an analysis, one finds these problems being prevalent as part of orthodoxy throughout Orissa among all sections of the society. Against these broad observations, let us first take Kanhu Charan's two important novels, *Ha-Anna* (1935) and *Shasti* (1946). Based on the devastating impact of the Great Famine of 1866, otherwise known as Na-Anka Durbhikshya, *Ha-Anna* may be a micro-study of the Naripur village with a love story superimposed on it, but the negative elements in the Oriya race and the ugly impact of the Famine with the change in human behavioural patterns, held true for the whole of the famine-stricken area. From Naripur to Puri, where Uma, the heroine of the novel, has taken shelter and where both Uma and his lover Jagu are finally united, the mad race for food among the teeming millions of starving people, and their accompanying irrational and beastly behaviour were a common sight. Apart from the ghastly picture of the famine, *Ha-Anna* is perhaps the first Oriya documented statement on the negative elements of the Oriya race. The use of such adjectives, like effeminate, cowardly, god-fearing, credulous, fool, etc. not only constructs an 'Oriya' character on negative elements, but it also explains the collective predicament of Oriyas since the 16th century when Orissa lost its independence. So on a superficial reading, *Ha-Anna* may appear to be village-centric as the plot revolves round the village, but as the narrative progresses, it thematically brings out what is quintessential Oriya, and of course the plot reaches its climax in the events at Puri town.

Shasti, although written after the gap of almost a decade, is generally supposed to be a sequel to *Ha-Anna*. Although both have the Famine of 1866 as the background, *Shasti* depicts the struggle of its hero, Sania in the post-Famine world. Since Sania has partaken food with others in the common, free, kitchen called *Annachhatra* during the Famine, he is treated as a fallen and outcaste person in his village. But this has not deterred him from his struggle to stand on his own; rather with the help of his former beloved Dhobi, he has won the struggle. He constructs

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a house of his own, starts cultivation, earns his living, and even turns his house into a shelter where destitute persons including a Muslim boy take refuge. Yet, the orthodoxy of the caste system and opposition to widow remarriage have not allowed him to marry Dhobi who belongs to a different caste, and has been a widow. While accepting his defeat, Sania has become somehow a rebel against the caste-based, religion-based society. He declares, "This house belongs to all. There will be no difference here on the basis of caste, religion and colour. All will toil and produce food from the chest of Mother Earth....We will build a new world, a new society—a human society." (p.143, *Shasti*) No doubt, *Shasti* expresses the pious desire for reconstructing the caste- and religion-ridden Oriya society in which such typical characters like Sania and Dhobi must be feeling suffocated and let down. But such reconstructing cannot be construed as inspired by Communism or Gandhian ideology, as some scholars have tried hard to prove. *Shasti* is all about the post-1866 Famine, and the plot moves around the succeeding few years, so how these ideas could have inspired Sania in his endeavours retrospectively! However, Kanhu Charan in this novel has transcended the rural society and spoken about the whole od Oriya society.

Kanhu Charan's other famous novel, *Jhanja* (1950) that is generally clubbed together with the above-discussed two novels, is mainly based on Cuttack town even though there are references to the village. It was written and published after the Independence of the country, and the period was crucial as many programmes and projects were being implemented for the socio-economic transformation of the country. Gandian ideals, Nehruvian model of Socialism and Vinobaji's Sarvodaya were being experimented in these programmes. In *Jhanja*, Kanhu Charan tries to reflect these ideas and ideals in the social works of Dushmanta, Kshyanaprabha, and Tusharkanti. The theme of the novel is straightforward. Hailing from a humble village, Tusharkanti stays in Cuttack with his wife, Kshyanaprabha, his mother and sister. Originally, he was a deputy magistrate, but as he lost his eyes due to smallpox, he lost his job When the family was undergoing hardship, Tusharkanti's friend Dushmanta helped them, and even gave them shelter in his house. Dushmanta is a social worker, and gradually Kshyanaprabha is drawn into the sphere of his social work. Tusharkanti does not oppose it, rather encourages her to do the social work. As a result, she is involved with all sorts of social works done by Dushmanta, like running orphanages, shelter-homes for the physically disabled, providing universal school education etc. But in the course of her social works, she experiences some bad and indecent incidents, people start doubting her character, and even magazines publish nasty comments on her. All

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these make her helpless and suffocated; she wants to escape from such a situation. Perhaps, that is why she requests her husband to leave Dushmanta's palatial house and the comforts at his place, and to go somewhere where she will get peace and solace simply by being at the feet of her husband. But where will she go? Kshyanaprabha herself realizes the vices of villages where heaps of garbage and diseases like malaria, smallpox and cholera are still rampant. Poverty and scarcity are endemic in villages, and in each house, there is family feud, plots and litigation. She also realizes that being in the town she has been able to do something for the poor and needy. Now if she goes back to the village, what can she do there? In her own submission, "Village is just the transformation of the hell where her existence will be lost." (p.91, *Jhanja*). But finally, she leaves Cuttack and goes to Bijipur where her father and stepmother stay. Her prime concerns have been her family and husband. She wants to enjoy her full womanhood by being a faithful wife and mother. Therefore, she rejects the town life and goes to live in a village with her father and mother.

Thus, in *Jhanja*, Kanhu Charan has moved back and forth between the town and the village. So how can we say that there is a complete transition from the rural to the urban in the novel? More importantly, it is difficult to agree that only in the urban culture vices like sexual exploitation of woman, mad rush for money and individualistic pursuit of a career are happening. We also find them in rural Orissa. But there is no doubt that Kshyanaprabha's return to the village and Dushmanta's escape to the tribal area of Koraput at the end of the novel, is in a way the triumph of rural Orissa over the urban.

The same motive of restructuring the society also seizes Kanhu Charan in his novel, *Bajrabahu* (1959) that thematically follows the known trajectory of his other well-known novels. The social work, undertaken by the two sons of the former Landlord, Ranasingh, his disapproval of their work, and finally his change of heart, all point to the author's social commitment to the reconstruction of the Indian society. Here also, Kanhu Charan moves back and forth between the village and the town, depending on the progress of the plot. The novel *Bajrabahu,* named after the elder son Subrat Bajrabahu, revolved around the life-story of Subrat who was influenced by both the urban culture of Cuttack and his rural background. Subrat, though college-educated, had no hesitation to work among the rural folk and tribals, for, his uppermost consideration was a new, classless society. It may not be wrong to conclude that *Bajrabahu* has effectively transmitted the author's message for social restructuring in the post-Independent India, by way of combining both rural and urban traditions.

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Kanhu Charan's *Kaa* (1956), based on the age-old Hindu belief in male primogeniture, has a plot that moves back and forth between the village and Cuttack town. The hero of the novel, Sunanda, a university graduate, has a business in Cuttack; after his marriage for first few years, his wife Nandita could not conceive. The people at the village treated her as 'barren', and started talking ill about her. But Nandita is more concerned about maintaining the family line—to have a family descendant. So she persuades her husband to go for a second marriage, and finally Sunanda marries Lalita, a girl chosen by Nandita herself. Though both Nandita and Lalita are co-wives, they become very close, and even share each other's moments of happiness and sorrow. But the situation changes with Nandita becoming pregnant, and Lalita leaving the village for Cuttack to stay with Sunanda out of despair. At last, Nandita gives birth to a boy, but due to delivery complications, she dies after a few days, leaving the child in the hands of Lalita.

Kaa is essentially a human drama, showing the supreme sacrifice of a faithful, family-bound, caring, traditional Indian wife for whom the husband is the ultimate. Human pathos apart, there is no forward-looking idea for social restructuring. Rather, Kanhu Charan's promotion for a second marriage solely for male inheritance shows his social conservatism. And paradoxically, this he has tried to achieve through a western-educated young man who works and resides in Cuttack town.

Two of Kanhu Charan's town-based novels, *Dheu Dheuka* (1962) and *Nirbishanka* (1973) seem to have completely broken away from the rural world, both in terms of theme and setting. *Dheu Dheuka* is the story of an engineer and his wife who periodically suffer from conjugal incompatibilities. The husband, Sukanta expects his wife Rama to maintain some urban standards, but she belies his expectation. This creates misunderstanding between husband and wife, but it comes and goes. The novel delves into the psychology of both. Once, Sukanta leaves the house on a long tour, immediately after scolding Rama left and right for certain reasons. Though both are upset with each other, finally when Sukanta comes back, he is united with Rama, and their misunderstanding is dispelled. In the novel, I do not find any vice that is typical of urban culture, the story is more of a faithful portrayal of the attempt of a city-based middle class couple to understand each other better and then compromise.

But Kanhu Charan's *Nirbishanka* is a bold commentary on moral defilement in urban life. Though herself a doctor, Pramada has been betrayed in her love life by an industrialist, and then fallen a victim to false promise and deceit. As a result, she has borne the illegitimate child of that industrialist and gets branded as characterless. No doubt, deceit,

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and immoral, illicit relationships are common in urban culture, but village culture is not totally immune to such vices.

At the outset of this article, I have indicated that Kanhu Charan is essentially a socially committed, responsible writer. Perhaps, he had an agenda to fulfill, and for that he has taken either village or town as the background in which plots unfold. Social reconstruction in India, and implementation of such progressive ideas like widow remarriage, inter-caste marriage, abolition of child marriage and untouchability, and creation of a just, equal society, are some of the issues that were dear to his heart. Over and above, Kanhu Charan was a great upholder of the traditional family value system of India. Hence, these issues return to his novels off and on. In his last novel, *Yakshya* (1985) written at the ripe old age of 79, Kanhu Charan again visits the village and reminds us that despite so much progress in the post-Independent India and spread of western education, society still fails to accept widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage. Kubera Behera and Parvati had to undergo a great deal of ordeals and face opposition from the society after their marriage and even after they had children. Needless to mention here that throughout his writer's career, Kanhu Charan has spoken against social orthodoxy and evils. But at the end, he realizes that there is no improvement in the situation. For example, even though in one of his early novels, *Nispatti* (1932), he boldly performs a widow remarriage, in his subsequent novels, like *Tathasthu* (1936), *Tunda Baida* (1944) and *Shasti* (1946) he has not ventured to repeat it, to carry it out again, maybe due to prevalent social orthodoxy and opposition to widow remarriage. Perhaps that is why, he finally writes *Yakshya* to sensitize the society about it. But the issues he is talking of cannot be categorized under 'rural' or 'urban' because they pertain to the whole society across the village-town divide.

However in my reading of Kanhu Charan's novels, I have come across only one novel called *Melani Maguni* (1984) where there is an indication of the transition from village to town. The hero, Akulananda, an educated young man from a village, manages to get employed in the family business of a rich man in the town, and stays there leaving his family behind in the village. Thereafter, it is all about his life story in the town, his association with his master's family, his wife's death, and finally his marriage with the master's daughter. But unfortunately, there is no issue in the novel; rather it is just a narrative on the life of the hero, which is very simple and mundane. Even though the hero is a city-dweller, he is not cut off from his roots that is, his village, nor is there any disdainful attitude towards rural life.

Contemporary to Kanhu Charan but unlike him, are three leading Hindi novelists namely Bhagwati Charan Verma, Bhagabati Prasad Vajpayee

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and Upendranath Ashk who have been rather categorical in their value judgment on the village. For example, in Verma's *Aakhree Daon*, many typical problems and inconsistencies in the village life are clearly stated. This he has done through the leading character of Chameli whose sufferings are shown as the result of the inconsistencies in rural life. Similarly, Ashk, in his novels, *Garmaraakha* and *Girti Diware*, has clearly brought out the wretched life and helplessness of the village folk.

As concluding remarks, I would like to first point out that the rural-urban transition in Kanhu Charan's novels is a marginal issue. The spatio-temporal considerations become insignificant in a context of seemingly universal prevalence of social orthodoxy and evils since ancient times. Secondly, Kanhu Charan, being socially committed and a realist, has structured his plots in such a way that he moves back and forth at ease between village and town, rural and urban, so as to forcefully communicate his ideas and concerns to his readers. Finally, the dividing lines between the rural and the urban do not transform to fault-lines and clash-lines between the two in Kanhu Charan's novels; rather they either are blurred in his treatment of various social issues or help in better appreciation of and sensitization to these issues.

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Second Person Singular (Poems) by Udaya Narayana Singh, tr. from Maithili by the Poet and Rizio Yohannan Raj, Katha, New Delhi; Pp 112, Rs.200

Katha Poets' Cafe that has already brought out an excellent collection of New Tamil Poetry and a fascinating collection of the Sufi verses of Shah Abdul Latif has come out with a new collection of the Maithili poems of the well-known writer and linguist Udaya Narayana Singh (known to the Maithili readers more by his pen-name, *Nachiketa*) in a fine English translation done by the poet in collaboration with the young poet-novelist Rizio Yohannan Raj. The book is especially welcome as very little of contemporary Maithili writing has been translated into English: it is not as if Vidyapati had no successors in the art of poetry!

Second Person Singular is a carefully produced collection of thirty-three poems illustrated by Sanjay Bhattacharya. The title poem is a lover's poem and a grammarian's poem at the same time. The speaker who has been asked to think of nature, politics, violence, corruption, business, social science, mythology, the phonetics of *kama* and a hundred disparate things is however obsessed by just the second person singular. The poem is conceived in a lighter vein, the occasional end-rhymes doubling the effect of abandon. (".theories of love-making, Cupid / traces of phonetics, philology of races, / the old mythical bird writing scriptures, / scribbles with black on white pictures; / I have been told : / times will change and so will Sita, / rhymes will bend and so will Gita...")

In the preface to the collection the poet has stated his intention to hide his identity: "When I write in any one of the above languages (Maithili, Bangla,Hindi, English) I try and erase all cues that would link with my discipline or my plural presence—even my age or marks that might otherwise bear my generational affiliations." That is how he came to choose a pseudonym in Maithili. His strategy of othering himself is to push his 'self' to the background and to foreground the social commentary on feelings, fellows and their frictions: " This is like changing one's *personal terminations* from the *first* to the *third person*, singular to be able to talk to 'you'—my second person singular." And yet the first person

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inevitably leaves its imprint on these poems and the linguist is very much at work behind the metaphor and the imagery.

"Between you and me an ocean sits and ponders its next move," says the poem, 'Quarrel with the Ocean;' someone is weeping on the other shore, a fish in mid-sea wonders which way the big waves would come this time; the falcons flying to remote lands wonder how to use a dictionary and the water-god with a light grip on the tide's hair wonders whether he should allow the ocean to win or 'the love between you and me.'

Love is a recurring theme in this cycle of poems. In 'Season of Love on Earth' the poet identifies himself with the rain-god ' who makes the sky weep with the century's most sordid tales where ghosts wield wands and dance.' There is an unmistakable Tagorean ring in lines like "I long to touch her with my loving brows moistened by the rain drops / so that I can read my words on her and / ask her for her hand and / remind her of the promises / she had made the last season!" The second person singular again tries to capture the intensity of the love-bond : the woman's words entering the man's heart in weary uncertainty, her feverish hands holding him 'like a hot vessel in which I do not know what sizzles, burns, cooks.' It is a conflagration that consumes the universe, followed by the solitary waiting for fruition.

The poet looks at poetry as a binding act. He walks into poetry when the world is asleep around him or is waiting to be decked out. He loves its odour that wraps his body 'like a dirty cloak' 'that has been unused for long.' The world goes on talking of things that constantly engage it: hunger, pain, parting, or wait for the instant gratification of the flesh; the poet then enters the subtle, ambivalent and erotic world of poetry. When the world wakes up, he would sleep with his poetry so that he will wake up in the want-less dawn, free from hurt.

Surprise is a necessary element in all poetry: the surprise not only of what happens, but the verbal surprise that comes from unexpected turns of expression. This book of poems is full of such freshness of phrase and metaphor. 'Verbum Sapienti, to Damayanti'is an example. As the sun peeps into the woods where Damayanti is asleep and his ray pierces Hiranya's body, it reveals his thirty-three faces, 'not one of them resplendent.' Again, Damayanti is advised not to cross the forest. 'In the darkness here, pimps wait.' These unexpected interjections give the poem a sure contemporary touch, as if the myth lives here, and Damayanti an Nala are not far different from us. In the process, the situation is demythified: " Damayanti, do not trust men!/They will ensnare you / in stories/ riddles / rumours." If she crosses the forest, it may write its first poem on her.

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The poet's tone grows tender and intimate when he addresses his sister, Ila Raja Singh, a poet who is no more. Again poetry itself is the subject of the poem; in one sense all the poems in this collection are about the art of poetry even while being apparently about other things. Expressing pain, especially the pain that concerns one very dear to you, is a challenge for any poet as it is fraught with the peril of becoming sentimental. But here it is understated: someone weeps within, but the sentences do not close, "the compounds get washed out in the rain / like hay in River Lagma, without a sound."('Sounds Growing Within').The poet has no claim even on what gets finally expressed—he cannot analyse, hate, neglect or amend the words; he can only visit them and gather them into a poem, adorn the dead, clothe her in a young tree's bark.

Udaya Narayana Singh has a specifically Indian idiom to which diverse elements contribute: names of people and places, recollections of his childhood village, the rivers, landscapes, community memories, kinships, myths, archetypes... 'After How Many Years' is typical in its invocation of the past of mango groves and bullock carts, of grandmas and babas, of veiled brides and misty mornings, of the village goddess and the tutors coming from distances, of flooded rivers and bitter quarrels, of marks of shame and povety. Nachiketa had captured all this in his poetry that he was thrown out for reciting as a child ; grown-up, he is back to read them in the same courtyard.

The language of the body is as important in these poems as the body of the language: "As I read your body / page after page, / the plot seems familiar / as though it's my own story"('The Familiar')The entire poem uses language as a metaphor for the body whose script has even its familiar punctuations and typos. But the blood understands only the language of touch with its sweetness and toxicity and the poet is unable to explain the nameless raw feeling that he is trying to acquaint himself with. Language is the central metaphor also in 'Synonyms' where the poet realises that dreams are dumb and deaf and can express themselves only visually. If they knew language, they would have uttered a thousand synonyms for her as for a goddess. He would have created a new thesaurus and written numberless poems. The discourse continues in 'The Seed' where the poet tries to 'parse' the indivisible in him as four poems sprout within him like seeds forcing him to sing in a mottled voice that is a blend of all the four. The poem reminds us instantly of Fernando Pessoa, the Portuguese poet who wrote four different kinds of poems under four different names. In fact what Pessoa did was only to dramatise the polyphony of poetry: each poet has many voices in him/her waiting to burst into language like the seeds in Udaya's poem. Only , some poets

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try to follow just one of the voices to lend their poetry some kind of consistency which is anyway an illusion as the subject is produced within discourses and each one of us is a multiplicity of subjects, the ego being but an effect of the compounding of these diverse subjectivities as Jacques Lacan would argue. In 'Why Don't You Write,' the protagonist says, not only his tongue, lips and teeth, but even his eyes, brows, skin, hair and pores can converse all the time. Letters cannot bear love's yearnings—they are too formal and inane. The fingers on her palm, the tossing on the bed, the syntax of whispers—these can better express love. So the poet asks his beloved not to complain about his not writing letters to her from afar.

Many of these poems like the one discussed above come close to ghazals in their mood and treatment though they do not follow the conventional formal structure of the ghazal. Poems like 'Swan'(I shall ask the swan of poetry / to be on its wing again / for, you are now a full-blown woman!), 'Disaster' (Why are you afraid, bird? None will demand to know your name / or where you have come from / Only tell us what you had known about / the poet whose coffin was laid just now.), 'You Are Unique' (I invoked you in my poetry / yet you never came to me; / you could have at least said a word / but you did not even turn to me). Many other poems remind us of the love poetry of the Sangam Age in Tamil—like 'Old Love', 'Wants', 'For my Husband'—though the signs of our time intervene, as pace-makers, dark glasses etc, making them a kind of rewriting of tradition. But in a poem like 'Accounts,' everyday takes precedence: Hiriya gives Jhauli five words daily as he goes to sow the seeds in the field. He puts one word on the burnt potato to make it edible, half he spends on the landlord who kicks him under the belly as he takes shelter under a tree from rains; one and a half is spent in the liquor shop to get a drink on credit, and with the remaining he buys salt, oil and turmeric. He has no more words left for his beloved at night though she will not open her heart without his speaking to her. So the whole night Jhauli freezes under the fog in the courtyard. The pain, the penury and lovelessness of a whole life are summed up in these lines that almost become a narrative of the hard life of a landless peasant in Mithila.

The poet's obsession with language and grammar also lends vitality to a poem like 'Speaking for Myself' where the poet addresses Kapalkundala whom he wants to liberate from the prison of prose, from the forest of tensed time and the shame of turning from a proper noun into a mere pronoun. Panini, Patanjali and Hemachandra hold her in their tight grammatical grip: but let her be led beyond rules and categories where she is at the centre, Singular!

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Black humour lends some of these poems a unique flavour as when the poet says a poet has three legs, a beastly one, one that holds a bottle of ink and another, a wooden one, of false pride. ('Leave a Little Space'). The poet's destiny is a recurring concern here as in 'Fear-1' where the frail old poet fears his poems might get lost, be plagiarized, be forgotten by the people or flee from him as he makes a speech from a pedestal! However this fear is conquered in 'Fear -2' as the poet is able to bite into any kind of text with the recently arrived pair of teeth! The Shakespearean question, 'What is in a name?' is reversed in a poem like 'Naming' which tells us how the name matters and a change of name transforms the meanings of things and events. "Life is only for those who live it,/ for those who live / and change ornaments / attire / price." By rechristening himself 'Dushyant' the poet turns his beloved into Sakuntala and brings to his life all the concerns of Kanva and the deer! Humour marks also the poem, 'Anarchic Poet' where in caustic irony the poet chides his contemporaries for writing poems in prose, of fear and decay: let them instead go on writing those lifeless and inane verses full of praise and platitude so that the conservative critics will be happy as they cannot cope with the hells and heavens of the anarchist modern poets! Poems like ' May be You Will Speak Up' and 'Read Me Your Poem' invoke mythical contexts to convey contemporary messages in a fascinating reversal of the *Mahabharata* and *Meghadootam*. In 'Biography', we move from the realms of myth and epic into history and biography. The poet here talks to his authorised biographer: let him put his history in order to begin with! The poem takes us through the entire pre-Independence years especially as lived and felt in Kolkata, invoked through suggestions of events, cultural upheavals and literary movements. Then come the history of the family, the childhood torments and follies, the crisis of identity in the youth, the coming of poetry and women. Finally the poet frees the official biographer of his difficult duty: "Look for another one/ yet unborn. / Look into another age- / the next millennium- / Meanwhile my poetry will care for me./She will relate my tales."

The translators have succeeded in creating certain parallel sound-effects and syntactical orders to offset the phonetic and structural losses the poems might have suffered in transmission. Poetry is not only what is lost in translation, but what is retained, replaced and at times even gained in the act.

K.Satchidanandan

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Selected Poems by Jibanananda Das, tr. by Chidananda Das Gupta, Penguin India, New Delhi, 2006, Pp. 82, Rs.150

A shy and introverted man, Jibanananda Das (1899 - 1954) was little known in his lifetime. Deeply admiring of Rabindranath Tagore, he would send his youthful work for the older poet's approval, but Chidananda Das Gupta's 'Introduction' informs us that while "the patriarch admitted that the young poet had some talent ... [he also] complained that he persecuted the language." Jibanananda's relentlessly honest and contemporary idiom undoubtedly disturbed more traditional poets. Here was a man who could write "From the spittle, the blood and the excreta / The fly rises into the sunlight," and compare sleep to that of "the plague rat, foaming blood at the mouth". ('One Day Eight Years Ago') No wonder that at his untimely death (he was struck down by a passing tram), Allen Ginsberg commented: "One poet dead, killed near his fiftieth year...did introduce what for India would be the modern spirit: bitterness, self-doubt, sex, street diction, personal confession".

Chidananda Das Gupta, a close associate of Jibanananda Das, is a distinguished translator of his poetry. He has already translated a volume of Jibanananda's poetry for the Sahitya Akademi's 'Makers of Indian Literature' series. And now with *Selected Poems*, Penguin have brought out a slim and reasonably priced collection that makes a very useful introduction to the work of an original and exceptional poet.

Occasionally the translation sounds old-fashioned and even stilted, with lines like:

> Under the canopy of stars my mind has slept;
> My boundless wishes I've fulfilled without let;
> Yet one day I have left them behind"
> ('Within My Head')

But, for the most part, the translations are very readable. Some notable successes (for both poet and translator) are fine lyrical poems like 'Wild Swans', 'Nine Swans' and 'I Will Leave it All'.

Jibanananda's name means 'Joy of Life' and the *Selected Poems* certainly prove him to be a poet who celebrated life, and the beauty of nature in particular. In 'Suchetana' he writes: "The good earth called me to be born / In human home" and:

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... with the tip of my finger
I have touched the stuff
Of the dew on the leaf at dawn

-lines that are reminiscent of Tagore's ecstatic appreciation of the natural world and his exhortation to find beauty at one's own doorstep in a grain of rice or a blade of grass. Yet Tagore's appreciation was often of an idealised nature, and the older poet was left embarrassed by his younger contemporary's celebration of beauty in strange and even grotesque forms - nature 'red in tooth and claw'.

Not that Jibanananda was indifferent to conventional beauty. He is justly famous for his eloquent poems celebrating the rural landscape of Bengal, particularly Barisal where he was born and spent his childhood. But the city and urban life were also important to him. His wonderful 'The Streets of Babylon' bears comparison with Wordsworth's famous poem about the city of London - 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802'. Here is the first half of Jibanananda's poem:

I do not know what faint whisper has made me walk
Through the streets of the city, alone, from one post
to another.
I have seen the trams and buses ply with such faith,
Then enter, at the end of day, into the world of sleep.
All night long the gas lamps do their duty so well;
None errs; bricks and houses, windows and roofs
All close their eyes at last under the sky.
I have felt their peace in my bones, walking through
The dead streets of the night; seen them gathered
Round the top of the tower; it seems I have not
seen
A simpler, more moving event. The starlit city, crowded
with towers;

Chidananda quotes the Kannada poet A K Ramanujan as commenting that: "Bengali poetry was obsessed with transcendence." But, according to Chidananda: "Jibanananda might have countered by asking of what use poetry would be if it was not concerned with transcendence, a prime element of Jibanananda Das's value-world." Transcendence is indeed paramount for Jibanananda. In his poem 'I Will Leave It All' it is the mundane and prosaic world that the narrator would leave for the transcendent world of his fertile imagination. "I will leave it all and turn into a tree", he says.

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I will peel off my human skin
And rub on my body
The scent of the tree's bark.

The surreal transformation ends with the declaration that he will wrap himself with the look of wonder on a mountain's face.

Jibanananda's poems have also immortalised such poetic names of women as Sarojini, Suchetana, Arunima Sanyal, Mrinalini Ghosal, and the best-known of all - Banalata Sen. The story goes that some of his family members once took him to task, demanding to know who was Banalata Sen of Natore and why was he writing poems about a woman who was not his wife!

Very appropriately, 'Banalata Sen of Natore' is the opening poem of *Selected Poems*. It has many of the distinctive features of Jibanananda's poetry: rhythm, a lyricism that is at once traditional and contemporary, fresh an unusual images and the themes of love, romance, fantasy and loneliness. It also has the poet's knack of using lists of names of peoples and places, both for their sound effect and for building atmosphere - especially one of romance: "from the seas of Ceylon to the straits of Malaya / ... / Through mist of Bimbisara, Asoka, darker Vidarbha."

'Banalata Sen of Natore' has been translated by many, but not often with the degree of success achieved by Chidananda Das Gupta. In translation, it has three stanzas and each ends with a rhyming couplet. Here is the rhyming couplet in Stanza Two:

'Where were you so long?' she asked, and more
With her bird's-nest eyes, Banalata Sen of Natore.

The "bird's-nest eyes" is a striking image and typical of Jibanananda's original use of language. The image evokes subtle associations. One can imagine the beloved's eyes containing a look that, like a bird's nest, is a shelter and a homing destination for the poet.

In fact, *Selected Poems* abounds with such arresting imagery. As already mentioned, Jibanananda often demonstrates a penchant for juxtaposing opposites: images that combine the ugly and monstrous with the beautiful and noble. For instance, the narrator in 'These Days and Nights' once heard of 'a leprous woman' who sang 'a wonderful song', a deaf-mute who played the violin 'divinely' and 'the black cats' that 'make love to tinsel birds'. In 'The Signet' there is something shocking about images of death and decay in the midst of purity and beauty:

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A decrepit horse chews on grass;
On its neck and legs the bugs circle
Mimicking the sound of dewdrops.
Yet, did this place, this frozen lake
Belong once to the snow-white horse
And will again one day?

It is Jibanananda's refusal to shy away from the painful realities of the 'shadow side' of life and beauty that endears him to the modern reader. He is a poet who squarely faces up to the corruption and commercialisation of city life; he exposes the self-serving hypocrisy of politicians and labour leaders:

Over their hearts no Chairman rules;
When their bodies wither
No Trade Union Congress holds out hope.
('These Days and Nights')

He notes the plight of the poor and homeless:

When they lose hearth and home, they do not know
Which set of labour laws they should turn to.
Or where to go for cooking oil, water, food itself
Or air to breathe, or open sea.

and:

Their sky is forever the pavement;
At times there is the ambulance.
War-torn troops come back
To an endless sky.
('These Days and Nights')

He is a poet who tells it as he sees it - warts and all. Jibanananda lived through the joy of India's independence and the trauma of Partition; his early lyrics have great eloquence and beauty, while his work in the last two decades of his life expressed his generation's frustration and anguish at the death of idealism, and at the ever-present obscenity of famine, hunger, war and violence - not only in India but in the world at large. The Bengal Famine, the violence of Partition, Hindu-Muslim riots, the Second World War - all gave Jibanananda a larger canvas and darker colours.

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In 1955, a year after the poet's accidental death on Kolkata's streets, Jibanananda's *Shreshtha Kavita* (Best Poems) won the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award. In the following decades, his poetry collections began to be published and widely circulated in both Bengals - West Bengal in India and East Bengal in what was then East Pakistan. The movement for independence in Bangladesh was to find rich inspiration in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and his younger contemporaries, Nazrul Islam and Jibanananda Das, among others. Tagore would perhaps have been surprised to find that the same Bengal that took him to its heart, was now also lauding the very different work of Jibanananda. Nor could he have predicted that here was a poet whose spirit of modernity was to sweep across the nation until, for many, Jibanananda acquired the status of the greatest Bengali poet of the post-Tagore era.

Debjani Chatterjee

Girish Karnad's Plays; Performance and Critical Perspectives, ed. by Tutun Mukherjee, Pencraft, Delhi, 2006. Pp. 376, Rs.695

Girish Karnad has by now achieved a unique iconic niche on the cultural landscape of this country and a secure reputation abroad. Actually, his dramatic career started with instant recognition. He is multi-faceted personality possessing an exceptionally brilliant mind, rare artistic talent and an excellent training to match. His work received serious critical attention.

Tutun Mukherjee has ably put together an assortment of critical papers dealing almost with the whole dramatic oeuvre of Girish Karnad. She states in the introduction: "our purpose here is to examine drama, script, theatre and performance as an integral enterprise, and argue for a convergence between 'drama' that is understood as a scripted text and 'theatre' that is supposed to be governed by a 'performative' text." In other words, the scope of these essays goes much beyond the usual academic criticism. It aims at dealing with the 'whole dramatic experience' both as a process and as an accomplished, living and pulsating cultural artifact.

Girish Karnad is his own best critic. In the prefaces to his plays

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and interviews he clearly articulates the historical and cultural contexts which his plays attempt to confront and tackle. He is a socially and politically conscious playwright. His plays are directed to the "post-colonial search for Indian roots." Most of his themes are either mythological or historical, and he has progressively shown that ancient Indian myths can be harnessed "to address the modern sensibility of loss of individual identity." He understood more fully the politics of his aesthetic choices and mastered the art of subversion of the well-established and endless deconstruction of the hierarchies with remarkable irreverence by complex manipulation. He both controls and manipulates the meaning in order to perform a subsequent act of reinterpretation.

Prof. Mukherjee's volume has included thirty-two essays covering twelve plays. It has a scholarly introduction which sets out the objectives and methodology of approach and execution. A detailed discussion with Karnad outlines his own, basic approaches. He is acutely aware of the state of Indian theatre in post-colonial India and the vacuum that an artist was required to fill. His own predicaments and political developments in the country were interwoven to remake new Indian drama, where the new technology and the new psychology had to play significant roles.

The first article entitled: "Playing upon the possibilities: *Ma Nishada* (1964) as *Agasayana* in the 1990's" breaks new ground, for it explores how the text gets transformed in the process of 'play performance.' Changing cultural processes are dramatized by modifying the text, so as to make the 'performance' a critical tool in the political context of 1990's. Foregrounding the existentialist orientation in the ancient epics of India and drawing upon the oral forms, the authors want to correct one of the features of modern Indian theatre that it is text-oriented and not performance-oriented. They also want to show how immense cultural possibilities open up when the original text is exposed to an assessment about how the socio-political problematic has been addressed, and also the question of author's commitment.

Four articles explore the complexity of *Tuglak* from different angles. While Basavaraj Naiker examines the follies of the Sultan from the standpoint of schism in his nature aggravated by the schism that divided his people, Veena Noble Das writes about the use and abuse of history by Karnad. According to her Karnad uses the critical way of looking at his historical character who suffers and yearns for deliverance. Aparna Dharwadkar's reading is from the standpoint of post-colonial representations in historical expositions by juxtaposing the dilemmas of post colonial India and the historical situation presented in the play, and drawing conclusions about how far the ideal solution work in curing the fissures

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in Indian's social and cultural fabric. C R Sinha narrates the long history of staging the play.

Hayavadana and Nagamandala receive competent expositions at the hands of prominent scholars who look at these mythical, existential tales from contemporary critical angles to bring out relevant meanings. The dialectical oppositions and contradictions in the basic situations in both the plays mirror our own situation today. Karnad goes back to his roots to revitalize his art, drawing from both the classical and the folk traditions. Karnad also mixes the modern and ancient techniques to twist and turn the form that he borrows from the west. N.P.Ashley's essay deals with the whole question of masks in the theme and the theatrical devices employed to dramatize it.

In *Bali* the urgent questions on gender including female sexuality, its relation to male domination in a patriarchal society and the question of violence and non-violence are researched dramatically. S.Subhash Chandran terms it "Dionysian Life Assertion." In *Tipu Sultan*, dream and reality is mixed to create history not as it was but as we wish it to be. The play questions and creates its own historiography, where history and myth are inter-mixed and inter-changed. Almost all the plays are subjected to exhaustive and competent scholarly analysis.

Prof. Mukherjee has made a significant critical contribution to Karnad studies in bringing out his anthology with great care and discrimination. Great care has also been taken by the publishers in producing the book in an elegant and accomplished form.

B.M. Bhalla

Merchants of Death, a novel by Neelima Dalmia Adhar, Har-Anand Publications Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2006, Pp. 371. Rs.395

This novel by a debutante is a huge family saga about three generations of Loyas, a marwari family that significantly influenced not only the financial-political fortunes in Indian history during the past five decades, but also seriously affected the social fibre in a substantial way by using the muscle power. And in so doing it provides an insight into the psyche of a community that's bedeviled by its own misfortunes. The narrative,

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bordering on factiction, seeks to portray the filth that lies underneath the great façade of riches, power and ambition. The seemingly contrived narrative, though moving back and forth in a somewhat rhythmic pattern, does not conform to any standard literary styles of storytelling but in the process does succeed in carving out its own individual place, and space, if one may say so.

The narrative largely runs through the socio-political rungs of Delhi and Calcutta and seeks to present a world which is selective, secretive and sacrilegious, though it does move to Dubai, London and New York but that one guesses is more to lend it some sort of a canvas and authenticity. The disclaimer says it all at the very outset: "Several well-known people... politicians mostly, make brief appearances in these pages, but this is a work of fiction and none of the other characters are real. Barring some facts that are historically documented, none of these events ever happened and any resemblance to any persons living or dead is purely coincidental." Yet almost everything contained in the narrative rings true, the disclaimer and camouflaging of the characters almost irrelevant to those who might have seen the grime beneath the gloss.

For what is visible behind the curtained scenario is the unhappy and almost despicable life of ambition, greed, manipulation, intrigue, promiscuity, incest, debauchery and whatever else is needed down the garden path. She dares and bares it all, and in the process of so doing Neelima Dalmia Adhar not only delves into fantastic raw material at her command but systematically seeks to expose the sheer hollowness in the world of a community caught up in its own whirlpool of lies, and more lies to hide the truth. The near ruthless narrative also seeks to expose that in this world of rich and infamous it is not the glitter of bedazzling gold, diamonds, rubies, sapphires and solitaires but lust and raw sex that governs all actions.

On the surface the novelist tries to unfold the story of Bharat Loya, grandson of Ghanshyam Das Gupta with sprawling business interests not only in Calcutta and Delhi that gradually spread its tentacles internationally, including arms deals and defence contracts complete with Swiss bank accounts and women as bedspreads as the cursed family moves from one generation to the other. Apart from money and philandering being a common bond, the underlying tension in keeping the secrets of the sinful Loya women - who either seem to be born with carnal desires on their palms, or almost invariably grafted into it once they marry in- under hats, keeps the narrative alive, and vibrant.

The Loyas "were in truth incompatible aliens. Their paths had forked into separate spheres of functioning, their goals diverse and autonomous.

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Yet, they were tightly knotted to each other in this temporal vista, for a specific period of time – each one governed by the diktat of their interlinked Karmic decree." Almost all the characters have been etched in a ruthlessly straight jacketed manner. Relationships do not matter. Emotions play no roles in their lives. There seems to be a deliberate or even unconscious attempt – considering the narrative style – to disallow a subtle portrayal of the interplay of motives and emotions between the various characters otherwise bound by a common heritage of wealth and perversity. Not a single character appears normal, or acts normally. And the women are an embodiment of "all seven of the deadly sins – pride, jealousy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust." Adhar judiciously mixes fact and fiction to keep the reader's interest alive. Real life politicians, bureaucrats, social climbers, small time film actresses and situations are used to relive certain socio-political events, at times even cleverly dramatized. But these are not always vibrant and convincing, and that's an inherent weakness of this extensive narrative with the telling effect that it tends to be repetitive. Also while so doing the desired tension is given a miss.

> *Merchants of Death* starts on a lucid, poetic note, and the same is evident even in the closing but somehow that flow does not get maintained in the remaining 360 pages. The author uses the direct and matter-of-fact style in narrating the yarn but she does not have either the language or the narrative skills of a novelist to chisel out a well-crafted work. It could also have done with some more pruning to keep the drama and tensions alive and kept the repetitive element of female sexual infidelity in check. The scenes of wild parties, drugs and sexual orgies amongst the young seem somewhat unreal, forced. "As the new-age, voraciously sexual woman, she could allow herself multiple sex partners and many of her associates talked openly about their intimate sex life, in and out of bed, but she actually did not know what she wanted."

Neelima Dalmia Adhar has the talent to put-together a yarn, but she needs to work on her craft. As it is, if one were to remove the tag of a novel, the narrative appears to be an extension of her earlier work, *Father Dearest – Life and Times of R K Dalmia*, a very engaging biography of her father.

Suresh Kohli

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Nearer Heaven than Earth: The Life and Times of Boshi Sen and Gertrude Emerson Sen by Girish Mehra, Rupa, New Delhi, 2007, Pp. 815, Rs.995

While the widely held view that we lack a sense of history has any validity has become a matter of serious debate in view of the learned work of Prof. Arvind Sharma on the subject, it is largely true that Indian literature is not rich in the field of biography, which is intimately connected with history. The few biographies that we have relate to eminent persons in the political field. But here too, with some exceptions, these are hagiographies. We do not have meaningful accounts of the lives of our great artists, writers, litterateurs, scientists and others. In this background the appearance of a massive volume on Boshi Sen, an eminent agricultural scientist and a great spiritualist and his American wife Gertrude Emerson is most welcome. It is amazing that we do not know much about this unique person whom Escott Reid, once Canada's High Commissioner in India, in his book *Envoy to Nehru* (1981) described 'as close to being a saint as anyone I have ever met' and whom M.S.Swaminathan, the doyen of our agricultural scientists considers "as the grandfather of the green revolution in the country."

Nearer Heaven than Earth, the book on the 'Life and Times' of the Sens is a 'command performance of the heart' for its author Girish Mehra, a retired civil servant. He met this unique couple who had settled down in Almora, at the foot of the Himalayas, when he was posted as the district magistrate there about fifty years ago. Having earned their affection, the Mehras soon became members of the Sen family. Being a matter of heart, the book is naturally much more than a mere biography. It is essentially a work of literature, written in a lofty style with a generous sprinkling of rich poetry.

Boshi Sen was born in Bishnupur in rural Bengal in a family which 'lived a comfortable life'. Boshi's father was an officer in the education department and was known for his scholarship in Sanskrit. His astrological calculations had indicated that 'his son would have great learning and faith, cast in the mould of ancient sages'. The child in fact grew to be that but the father could not see that growth since he died when Boshi was only twelve. The young boy somehow managed to pursue his education with the help of his sisters. He studied under Prof. J.C.Bose in the University of Calcutta and later joined his laboratory at a salary of Rs. 20 a month on the advice of Sister Nivedita, with whom Boshi

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had already come into contact. After working at the Bose Institute for Fundamental Research for about ten years, he set up his own laboratory, — called Vivekanand Laboratory – at 8, Bosepara Lane, Kolkata in 1924. It was permanently shifted to Almora in 1926 when he made Kundan House in Almora his home for the rest of his life.

His journey on the road to faith had begun when he was a student of St. Xavier's College. On a fateful day early in 1909 an older friend took him to the Belur Math .Here he met Swami Sadananda (born as Sarat Chandra Gupta), the first disciple of Vivekananda. The meeting began on a harsh note. But when Boshi was leaving, Swami Sadananda 'looked long and deeply into his eyes' and said simply "All I have is yours." The guru had recognized his disciple. Boshi's guru died in 1911, when he was just ready to join the M.Sc. course. At that time he, more or less, made up his mind to join the Ramakrishna Mission. But again on the advice of Sister Nivedita ,he met his professor, J.C. Bose who told him that 'two more years of scientific research will not jeopardize your soul.' These eleven words retained Boshi in science – but without in any way diminishing his spiritual quest.

In fact Boshi Sen was absolutely clear in his mind that there was no conflict between science and religion. He has written long essays on the subject, including one in the *Modern Review*. Girish Mehra has reproduced them *in extenso*. It is somewhat surprising that the question of dichotomy between the two is raised even when some top scientists have denied it. Srinivasa Ramanujan, the great mathematician, is known to have said "an equation for me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God." For Fritjof Capra, the author of *Tao of Physics*, there is similarity between Shiva, the power of destruction and the quantum theory. At a symposium in Los Angeles on 29 October, 1977 he again said that the modern western science and eastern mysticism, particularly the tradition of yoga, lead to very similar views of the world. Schroedinger, the famous German physicist had almost become a 'Vedanti'. In his two-day meeting with Einstein (18 and 19 November, 1930) Boshi discussed with him the 'philosophical aspects of science and religion and their mutual compatibility.'

A voice of reason, Boshi yet was the epitome of faith. His life was an unusual amalgam of a *bhakta* and *karmyogi*. His religion was not just ritual-based but was also concerned with the eternal and ethical values. He would often recall what Tagore had told Romain Rolland: 'The true purpose of religion is to reach down to the fundamental unity of human relationship, of human efforts and achievements.' It was entirely due to his adherence to faith that he stuck to science when he had almost decided to become a monk in the Ramakrishna Mission.

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Boshi not only worshipped God in his puja room but also through his work. He was thus a real *karmyogi*. According to *Srimad Bhagwat*, *karmyoga* is simply doing the work to wake up the soul – 'to work for work's sake without any attachment, without any craving for name, fame or reward.' Boshi all his life strove hard to live this ideal. He had deeply imbibed what Vivekananda had said : 'Our religion consists not merely of our brief meditative moments but it comprehends life's every detail. How we act. How we think. How we feel.'

Such an understanding of religion and duty enabled Boshi to understand the teachings of Vivekananda (after whom he had named his laboratory) and follow them in his scientific work. Vivekananda had said 'I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven .... I do not believe in a God or religion that cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth.' This brought about a basic change in Boshi's research. He turned his attention from pure physiological research to the problems of practical agriculture. He thus strove to worship the Divine in man.

Boshi Sen's wife, Gertrude Emerson, is also the subject of this biography which gives a detailed account of the illustrious American family of the Emersons. Gertrude was born on 6 May, 1890. Her great grandmother Deborah Hall was the wife of Samuel Ingham, Secretary of the Treasury (1829-31) under President Andrew Jackson. Her father, Alfred Emerson Sr. studied many languages including Sanskrit (in a German university), travelled extensively in Europe and finally settled down as a Professor of Classical Languages and archeology at Oxford, Ohio. In her childhood when Gertrude was sent to a Catholic convent, she fell under the spell of the sisters and longed to become a nun. But later when she acquired some knowledge of Buddhism and Islam she was glad that she had not been allowed to become a nun at a tender age. After her graduation she was sent to Japan to spend a year with a family friend, where she developed great interest in the cultural aspects of the life of the country. She was impressed by the devotion of the Japanese towards their country and their love of nature. Before her return she also visited China and came back via Europe. By now Gertrude had decided that 'she preferred writing to preaching' and this ultimately led to her appointment as Associate Editor of the *Asia* magazine in March 1917. In 1921 Getrude set out on an extended tour of the Far East on behalf of her magazine. During this tour she visited India for the first time. Almost as soon as she landed in Calcutta she wrote to Gandhiji for an interview. Prompt came a reply that she should meet him at the house of Lala Lajpat Rai in Lahore. Soon she had a second meeting

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with him at the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad. Her second visit to India was in 1926 when she took a year's leave to live in a village in India to understand this country. Gandhiji suggested that she might stay in a village in Bihar but she stuck to her original programme to spend the year in Pachperwa (Five Trees) in the then Balrampur Estate in district, Gonda, U.P. It started her wanderings in South Asia which enabled Gertrude to absorb 'the wisdom of these ancient lands and people' and got ready 'in the true fashion of the tumbleweed, to find 'her own fence or post to hang on. This she did in the person of one Boshi Sen.'

Mehra has portrayed the depth of Gertrude's personality in an equally brilliant manner. After all she had found her guru in Boshi Sen. Although they had first met in New York in 1923 (it was hardly a meeting) Gertrude really came to know Boshi in 1926 when she visited India to spend a year in Pachperwa. During this period she wrote *Voiceless India* which Gandiji thought was a fitting reply to Miss Mayo's notorious work *Mother India*. They met in Calcutta after which Gertrude described her future husband to her magazine *Asia* as "generous, loving, full of imagination, brilliantly alive." Thus began their interest in each other. The friendship, however, grew gradually. In 1929 when Boshi was in New York, Gertrude would wait for him in the evening. One day waiting endlessly for him she wrote a poem "I listen for my beloved's feet/in the noisy traffic of the Eighteenth Street." They got married on 2 November, 1932. The two long chapters written with sensitivity and warmth, 'A Miracle in the Making' and 'One in a Million' bring out the fascinating phase of the life of this extraordinary couple. Gertrude lived for another thirteen years after Boshi's death. The chapter 'Gertrude: Sans Boshi' is an account of those years. It contains a number of letters written by some of the outstanding personalities of that time, including Indira Gandhi to 'Aunt Gertrude' very often containing biased grievances against others.

Boshi and Gertrude are not the only two characters in the book. Almora and Kundan House where the Sens lived in that beautiful town are also virtually characters of this drama. Apart from the scenic beauty and serenity of Almora the cultural and intellectual life of the town and its vicinity were equally stimulating. What a galaxy — Ram Maharaj (a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Mission who lived in Almora for 35 years), Earl Brewster, a famous painter, the Vaishnav Sadhus of English origin, Krishnaprem and Madhavashish, at the Mirtola Ashram, the well-known Buddhist scholar Lama Angarika Govinda and his wife Lee Gautami, Uday Shankar and the artists of his Centre, like Simkie, Alauddin Khan and others. The Sens were deeply interested in literature, particularly poetry and art and the Kundan House was really the magnet for all

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these activities. Mehra has reproduced what the visitors from all over the world, who visited Kundan House from time to time felt after being there. The Sens knew and were in touch with some of the best minds of the world. The author's accounts of their meetings with Gandhiji, Nehru and other giants of that time are examples of prose writing that would deeply touch any reader. From a brief meeting with Nehru in 1934 to the deep friendship between the two families comes out vividly in the book.

To write a good biography is a difficult art. Poetry derives its strength mainly from imagery and sensibility, a novel from its structure and style. Biography, on the other hand, is an exercise to delve deep to understand the life of an individual with its varied facets. Then only it reveals the drama and the message that emerges even from ordinary lives. Writing a good biography requires that the author, who must have an enduring personal identity, should be able to make a subtle analysis of the complex inter-relations of the components within its ambit. Also he should share with the characters of his work and the audience for whom he is writing, the humanistic concepts of an enlightened human nature. The book adequately fulfils these requirements.

B.N. Tandon

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lated into several Indian and foreign languages; recipient of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, Gangadhar Meher Award, Kumaran Asan Award etc. Add: 7 C, Neeti Apartment, Plot No. 84, I.P. Extn., Patparganj, New Delhi 110 092.

Seth, Rajee Eminent Hindi novelist and short-story writer; has published nine collections of short stories and two novels; has also translated 100 letters of Rilke into Hindi; recipient of several prestigious awards; was Fellow at Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla. Add: M-16 Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

Shahryar (b.1936) Writes ghazals and nazms; Sahitya Akademi Award-winner for his poetry collection *Khwab Ka Dar Band Hai*, 1987. Add: 4/81A, Kabir Colony, Jamalpur, Aligarh.

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Shekhar, Hansda Sowvendra (b.1983) A final-year medical student; his works have appeared in newspapers like *The Sunday Statesman* and *The Asian Age*; also writes for the online community *Sulekha.com*. Add: STB-15, HCL/ICC, Moubhandar, Ghatshila, East Singhbhum District, Jharkhand 832 303.

Sitaramayya, Ari Telugu short-story writer; translates from Telugu to English; has one collection of Telugu short stories, *Gattu Tegina* and one translation of a novel by the Telugu writer Volga into English; presently he is associated with Oakland University, USA,. Add: Professor of Biomedical Sciences, Eye Research Institute, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309, USA..

Sukumaran (b.1957) Tamil poet, writer, and journalist; translates from Tamil into Malayalam and from both, into English; has published 5 collections of poetry, two collections of essays and several works in translation. Add: Rajasree, E-12 Judge Lane, Sasthamangalam, Thiruvananthapuram 695 010.

Tandon, B.N. Add: Director, K.K. Birla Foundation, B-1/2 Pusa Road (Near City Hospital), New Delhi 110 005.

Thomas, A.J. (b.1952) Indian English poet with one collection of poems to his credit; also translates poetry, fiction and plays from Malayalam into English and vice-versa; writes features and articles on literature and reviews books; recipient of Katha Award, AKMG Prize and Hutch Crossword Award (2006); presently Editor, *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi.

Verma, Anoop (b.1966): Indian English short-story writer and novelist; has one novel, *A Thread of Life* to his credit. Add: A 67/1, DDA (SFS) Flat, Saket, New Delhi 110 017.

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